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Jenisha From Kentucky

I came to New York sure of one thing—that no one could ever know my past.

By Jenisha Watts

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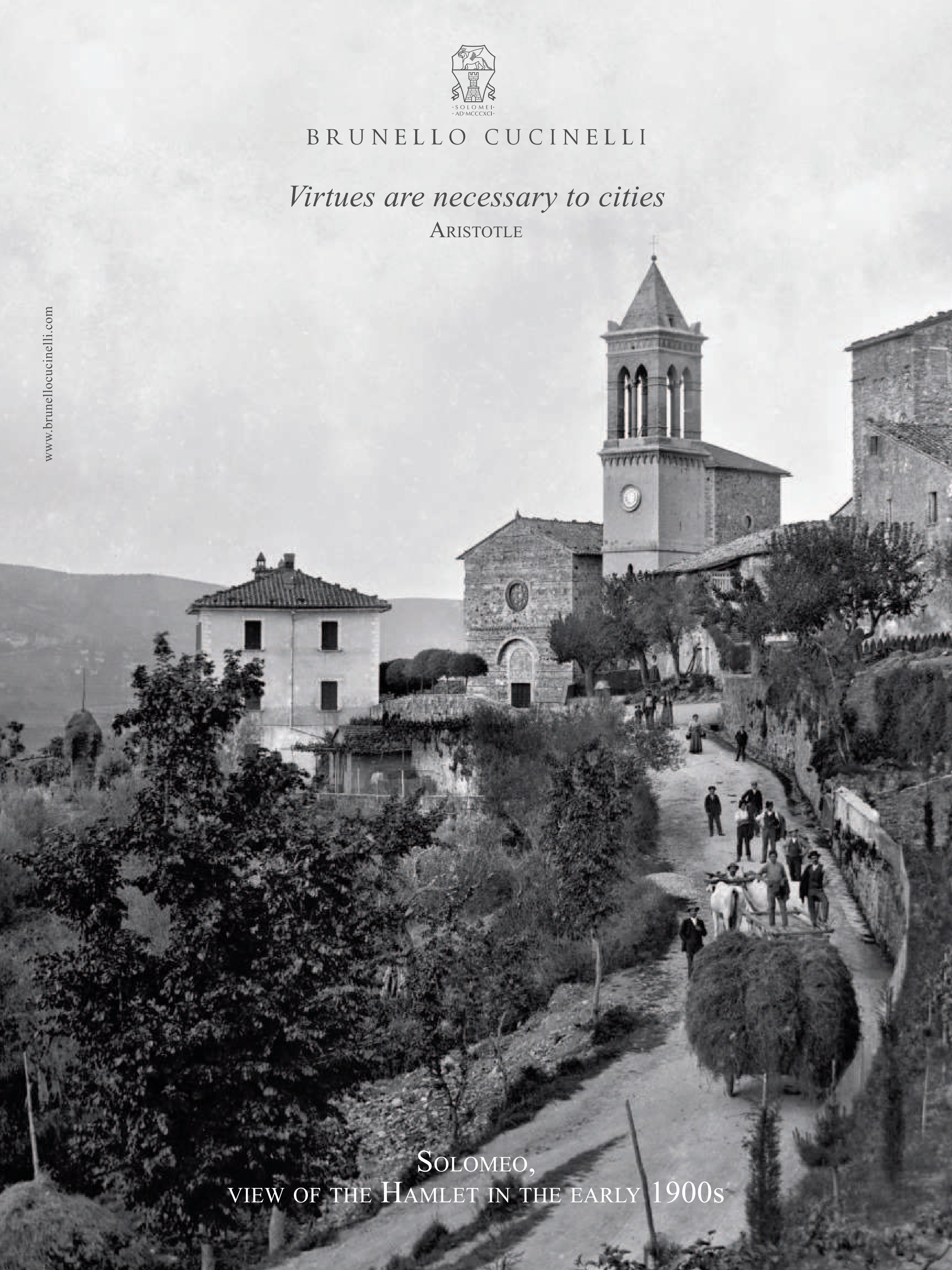
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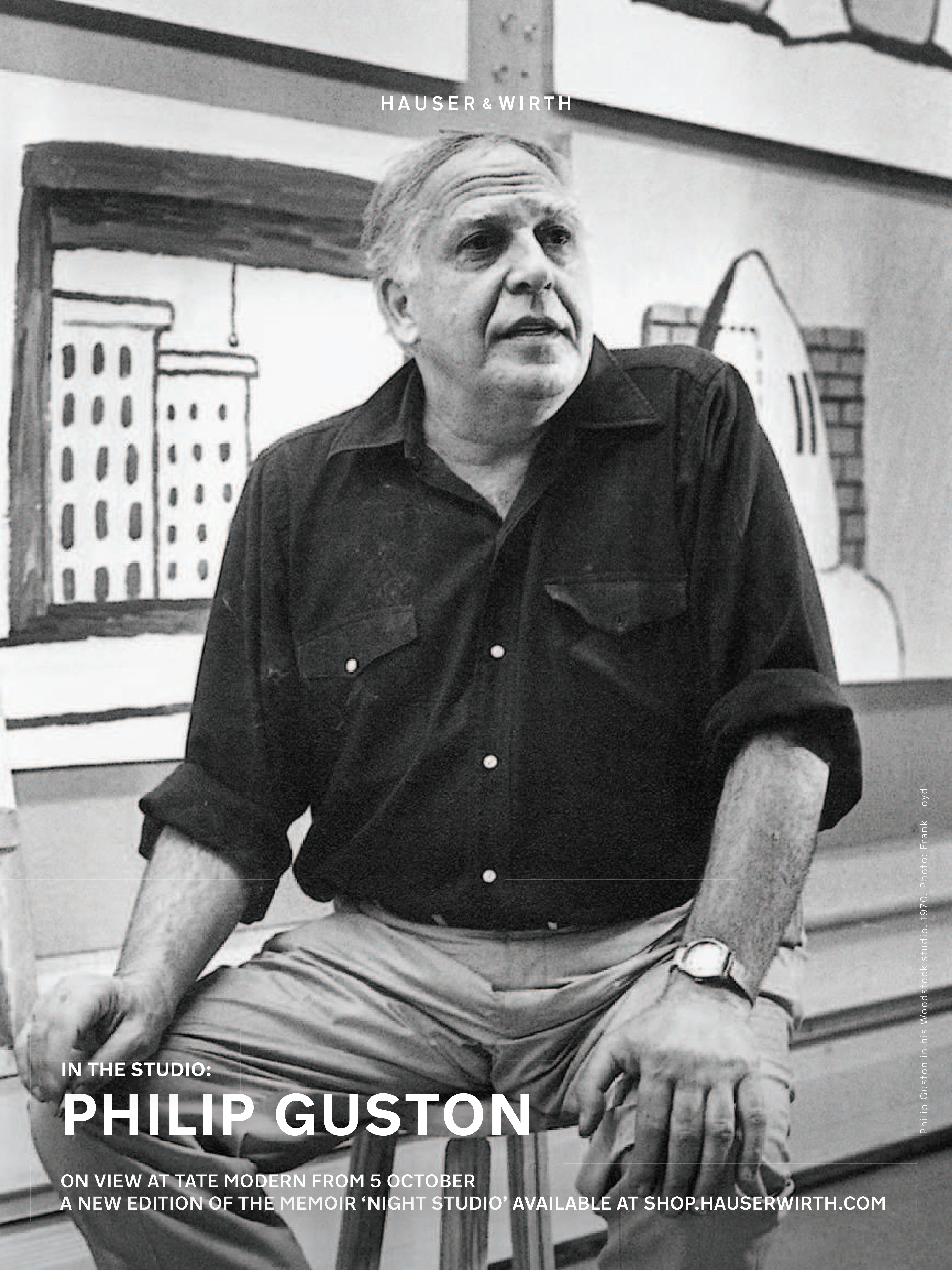
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ILLUSTRATION BY DIDIER VIODÉ



Philip Guston in his Woodstock studio, 1970. Photo: Frank Lloyd

THE MEDIA CHALLENGE BEFORE US

Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg, two men apparently starving for both attention and meaning, have lately been promising to fight each other in a "cage match." Charlie Warzel, *The Atlantic*'s in-house expert on this relationship (he has other responsibilities as well), recently wrote, "As the result of an inexplicable series of firing neurons, Musk managed to not only type but also send the following two-sentence tone poem: 'I will be in Palo Alto on Monday. Let's fight in your Octagon.'"

"At a sentence level," Charlie explained, "these words, strung together in this order and seemingly without irony, are hilarious. From the standpoint of being a human, the Musk-Zuck cage match is an offensive waste of time—the result of a broken media system that allows those with influence and shamelessness to commandeer our collective attention at will."

Charlie's acid commentary reminded me of our colleague Megan Garber's March 2023 cover story, "We're Already Living in the Metaverse," which argued that reality has become distorted by our pathological need to be entertained. Megan examined society's addiction to illusion and trivia and cited the great dystopian writers of the recent past, who warned that "we will become so distracted and dazed by our fictions that we'll lose our sense of what is real." The result, Megan wrote, "will be a populace that forgets how to think, how to empathize with one another, even how to govern and be governed."

I'm fascinated by Megan's work, and the work of thinkers who have come before her, including Neil Postman and Newton Minow, the former chair of the Federal Communications Commission who argued in a 1961 speech that TV was being turned into a "vast wasteland."

Megan's story prompted me to visit Minow in Chicago earlier this year. He was 97 when we met. I'd heard that Minow was, unaccountably, an optimist, and I wanted to understand how someone who thought that the television programming of 1961 was noxious and stupid could look at our culture today—a culture shaped by people like Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk—and not feel despair.

We had lunch in his apartment, the same apartment in which he hosted the very first political fundraiser for one of his law firm's former summer associates, Barack Obama. Minow was sharp, talkative, and wryly humorous. He was pleased that his 1961 speech—certainly one of the most consequential ever delivered at the intersection of culture and politics—had prompted the television executive Sherwood Schwartz to name the boat in *Gilligan's Island* after him. Minow explained that, at his age, he was counting on God to watch over us, and that he believed in the dictum, widely attributed to Churchill, that Americans will do the right thing after trying everything else. More to the immediate point, he took comfort from watching every minute of the televised January 6 hearings. He noted, "They brought in a television producer to communicate to the American people." This gave him hope that the tools at our disposal could be used for good as well as bad. "I'm still appalled that so many Americans don't take January 6 seriously," he said, but added that it means something that many millions of them watched, and learned, from the medium he once criticized.

I spoke for several hours with this prophet, who died a couple of months after our meeting. We discussed the fairness doctrine, the wisdom of Eleanor Roosevelt, the history of the BBC. As I was leaving, he praised magazines like this one for holding the line, for believing that Americans are capable of sober, focused, complicated, and informed thought. At *The Atlantic*, we try to talk up to our readers, not down, and Minow reminded me that this is a worthy cause.

THIS MONTH, we publish one of the most heartbreaking, insightful, and emotionally resonant stories in recent memory, "Jenisha From Kentucky," by our senior editor Jenisha Watts. I cannot summarize it for you. I can only say that it is a beautiful and transcendent story, one that takes time to read and absorb. The support of readers like you is what allows us to publish the work we do, and I am in your debt. In a time of foolishness, of billionaire cage matches and political idiocy, I am all the more grateful.

—Jeffrey Goldberg

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Behind the Cover: In this month's cover story, "Jenisha From Kentucky" (p. 26), the *Atlantic* senior editor Jenisha Watts reflects on how her mother's addiction shaped her childhood in Lexington. She describes finding escape and empowerment in literature and narrates her struggles as a young writer and editor in New York, determined to hide her past. Our cover image is a portrait of her painted by the Ivorian artist Didier Viodé. With a minimalistic color palette and broad, acrylic brushstrokes characteristic of his style, Viodé strove to capture Jenisha's self-possession.

— Elizabeth Hart, *Art Director*

THE

How Baseball Saved Itself

For the July/August 2023 issue, Mark Leibovich went inside the desperate effort to rescue America's pastime from irrelevance.

Letters

Thank you for the fantastic article on baseball. During the 1960s, I was a Ph.D. student in the College of Engineering at the University of Michigan. About the time baseball season began one year, I participated in a robust argument over America's favorite pastime with my colleagues. I felt that it was an incredibly boring way to spend time, and I wanted to debate the subject with empirical evidence. As engineers, we agreed to define "action" as any time the ball or a player was moving. I then used a stopwatch to determine the ratio between "elapsed time" and "action" in a typical game.

I applied this definition to a game the following Saturday. Unsurprisingly, the ratio was 20 to 1—for every hour of elapsed time, one would see just three minutes of action. Professional football and basketball have far more action per hour than baseball under the same definition, which I think explains their relative popularity.

It wasn't solely the analytics revolution that slowed down the sport—baseball's always been like that! The question now is whether I should analyze another game to determine if the new rules changed it for the better.

David M. Carlson
Fountain Valley, Calif.

Baseball, the eternal game, shouldn't be shortened—if anything, it ought to be lengthened, after the model of classical cricket. Live in the moment. Each pitch presents the entire history of the universe. The pitcher rotates the ball in his hand, feeling ever so sensitively for the contours, the stitching, the seams that might yield an advantage, before hurling it to the plate with the force of Zeus's thunderbolt.

But how will the baseball travel? Will it sink or curve, go high or low, flutter in or out, changing speed as it continues to its destiny? Breathing in, the umpire concentrates on the ball speeding toward him. Breathing out, he calls a ball or a strike, with thousands of eyes cast upon him and his judgment. The loneliness of the umpire, the batter, and the pitcher sets them outside time. At that fateful moment of contact between ball and bat or mitt, all existence is suspended.

To shorten that momentary dance with eternity is to miss the meditative profundity of a baseball game. No, Mark, it is we who are at fault for wanting to speed up the game, with designated batters, virtual walks, limits on mound visits, pitch clocks, and rigid placement of the fielders.

David Glidden
Riverside, Calif.

I wanted to read Mark Leibovich's article on baseball's updated approach, but found it difficult when I ran across another dusty relic that needs to go: Red Sox worship among the media elites.

I grew up a Yankees fan, but somewhere along the line, sportswriters began looking at the Yankees–Red Sox rivalry as if it were the defining narrative of baseball. As they cast the Yankees as the bad guys who were always trying to buy the World Series, and the Red Sox as the good guys who represented the nobler, purer defenders of the sport, they seemed to forget that many people in other parts of

COMMONS

DISCUSSION & DEBATE

the country don't care for either team. If anything, they tend to hate both teams because the sports media spend too much time writing and talking about them. After all, other teams have equally storied pasts. Speeding up the game and giving the rules a hard look will certainly improve the experience for fans, as Leibovich writes. But it's long past time for the sports media to recognize their part in holding the game back by ignoring more interesting narratives.

Eric Reichert
West Milford, N.J.

I share Mark Leibovich's joy over the new baseball rules to speed up the game. But baseball isn't that much slower than other sports. The average basketball game lasts anywhere from 135 to 150 minutes. There are constant interruptions precipitated by fouls, time-outs, and halftime. And the final two minutes on the clock can take 15 minutes.

Most unsettling for those of us who love baseball is the constant complaint from football fans that our sport is slow while football is fast. Their favored 60-minute romp takes more than 180 minutes to complete. And, as a wise observer once pointed out, to make matters worse, football combines two of the most detestable facets of American life—violence and committee meetings.

Perhaps someday the NBA and the NFL will take lessons from MLB and learn how to shorten their games.

Dennis Okholm
Costa Mesa, Calif.

I agree with Mark Leibovich's conclusions regarding the benefits of baseball's new pitch clock. The pitch clock is the greatest innovation the sport has seen in ages, and it may well save the game. But the gradual slowing-down of games was not the only thing that drove fans away from baseball.

Consider the 1994 strike, which canceled approximately a third of the season and the World Series and was seen by many as millionaires fighting over lucre, fans be damned. Or consider the over-the-top salaries, even for subpar players, as ticket and concession prices have skyrocketed. Baseball once sold itself as the best buy for family entertainment in America—but it hasn't been that for quite some time.

Finally, the cheating that has gone on for decades has put off many fans, and the lack of any meaningful accountability has surely only made it worse. Players who were known to use banned substances—Barry Bonds, Mark McGwire, Sammy Sosa—still lead the league's counts for most home runs in a single season, accolades that should have been expunged from the books. And Leibovich barely touches on perhaps the worst of these scofflaw violations: The Houston Astros were caught cheating in the 2017 and 2018 seasons, including the 2017 postseason, which netted the team a World Series victory. Nonetheless, they were permitted to keep the championship title, and none of the players who cheated was disciplined—they are still playing now. When several Chicago White Sox players conspired to throw the 1919 World Series, by contrast, they were barred from baseball forever. For some fans, these problems are more serious than the length of games.

Allen J. Wiener
Clearwater Beach, Fla.

MARK LEIBOVICH REPLIES:

Thanks to all those who took the time to reply to my article; I hope it was at least more engaging than the baseball of years past. Major League Baseball certainly has no monopoly on potentially league-destroying scandals. Each major sport has faced its share of drug, gambling, and cheating catastrophes over the years, and no league has cornered the market on bad leaders, clueless commissioners, or idiotic owners either. Sports fans have shown themselves to be willing to forgive a lot—but not necessarily boredom. Of all the sports, baseball is uniquely slow. No matter how many stoppages there might be at the end of a basketball game, the clock guarantees that very few NBA contests surpass two hours and 30 minutes. Football games rarely take more than 3:20, and the fact that teams play only once a week buys a great deal of spectator leeway. Last, I'll apologize for indulging my Red Sox compulsion. I've always assumed that the Sox-Yanks thing was off-putting to nonpartisans, even when the rivalry was at its most compelling (not recently, in other words, unless you count this season's epic battle for last place in the American League East). In the spirit of fellowship, I'll concede that some of my favorite baseball friends are Yankees fans. We are more alike than not—beyond just insufferable.

To respond to *Atlantic* articles or submit author questions to The Commons, please email letters@theatlantic.com. Include your full name, city, and state.

Corrections: "The Resilience Gap" (September) misidentified Richard Friedman as the former coordinator of Cornell's mental-health program instead of its former medical director. After publication, "Killer Apps" (September) was updated online to clarify YouTube's policy for removing videos, which excepts artistic content such as music videos from its prohibition on harassment.

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DISPATCHES

OPENING ARGUMENT

TRUMP ON TRIAL

The drama now unfolding will make for perhaps the most surreal presidential-election cycle in American history. How will it end?

BY QUINTA JURECIC

No one wants to appear before a judge as a criminal defendant. But court is a particularly inhospitable place for Donald Trump, who conceptualizes the value of truth only in terms of whether it is convenient to him. His approach to the world is paradigmatic of what the late philosopher Harry Frankfurt defined as *bullshit*: Trump doesn't merely obscure the truth through strategic lies, but rather speaks "without any regard for how things really are." This is at odds with the nature of law, a system carefully designed to evaluate arguments on the basis of something other than *because I say so*. The bullshitter is fundamentally, as Frankfurt writes, "trying to get away with something"—while

law establishes meaning and imposes consequence.

The upcoming trials of Trump—in Manhattan; Atlanta; South Florida; and Washington, D.C.—will not be the first time he encounters this dynamic. His claims of 2020 election fraud floundered before judges, resulting in a series of almost unmitigated losses. In one ruling that censured and fined a team of Trump-aligned lawyers who had pursued spurious fraud allegations, a federal judge in Michigan made the point bluntly. "While there are many arenas—including print, television, and social media—where protestations, conjecture, and speculation may be advanced," she wrote, "such expressions are neither permitted nor welcomed in a court of law."

But only now is Trump himself appearing as a criminal defendant, stripped of the authority and protections of the presidency, before judges with the power to impose a prison sentence. The very first paragraph of the Georgia indictment marks this shift in power. Contrary to everything that Trump has tried so desperately to prove, the indictment asserts that "Trump lost the United States presidential election held on November 3, 2020"—and then actively sought to subvert it.

Although Trump loves to file lawsuits against those who have supposedly wronged him, the courtroom has never been his home turf. Records from depositions over the years show him to be sullen and impatient while under oath, like a middle schooler stuck in detention. Timothy L. O'Brien, a journalist whom Trump unsuccessfully sued for libel in 2006, recalled in *Bloomberg* that his lawyers forced Trump to acknowledge that he had lied over the years about a range of topics. Trump has seemed similarly ill at ease during his arraignments. When the magistrate judge presiding over his arraignment in the January 6 case asked whether he understood that the conditions of his release required that he commit no more crimes, he assented almost in a whisper.

COURT IS A PARTICULARLY INHOSPITABLE PLACE FOR TRUMP, WHO CONCEPTUALIZES THE VALUE OF TRUTH ONLY IN TERMS OF WHETHER IT IS CONVENIENT TO HIM.

All of this has been a cause for celebration among Trump's opponents—because the charges against him are warranted and arguably overdue, but also for a different reason. The next year of American politics will be a twin drama unlike anything the nation has seen before, played out in the courtroom and on the campaign trail, often at the same time. Among Democrats, the potential interplay of these storylines has produced a profound hope: Judicial power, they anticipate, may scuttle Trump's chances of retaking the presidency, and finally solve the political problem of Donald Trump once and for all.

It has become conventional wisdom that nothing can hurt Trump's standing in the polls. But his legal jeopardy could, in fact, have political consequences. At least some proportion of Republicans and independents are already paying attention to Trump's courtroom travails, and reassessing their prior beliefs. A recent report by the political-science collaborative Bright Line Watch found that, following the Mar-a-Lago classified-documents indictment in June, the number of voters in each group who believed that Trump had committed a crime in his handling of classified information jumped by 10 percentage points or more (to 25 and 46 percent, respectively).

And despite Trump's effort to frame January 6 as an expression of mass discontent by the American people, the insurrection has never been popular: Extremist candidates who ran on a platform of election denial in the 2022 midterms performed remarkably poorly in swing states. Ongoing criminal proceedings that remind Americans again and again of Trump's culpability for the insurrection—among his other alleged crimes—seem unlikely to boost his popularity with persuadable voters. If he appears diminished or uncertain in court, even the enthusiasm of the MAGA faithful might conceivably wane.

Above all of this looms the possibility of a conviction before Election Day, which has no doubt inspired many Democratic fantasies. If Trump is found guilty of any of the crimes of which he now stands accused, a recent poll shows, almost half of Republicans say they would not cast their vote for him.

But that outcome is only one possibility, and it does not appear to be the most likely.

AMERICANS WHO OPPOSE Trump—and, more to the point, who wish he would disappear as a political force—have repeatedly sought saviors in legal institutions. The early Trump years saw the lionization of Special Counsel Robert Mueller as a white knight and (bewilderingly) a sex symbol. Later, public affection turned toward the unassuming civil servants who testified against Trump during his first impeachment, projecting an old-school devotion to the truth that contrasted with Trump's gleeful cynicism. Today, Mueller's successors—particularly Special Counsel Jack Smith and Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis, who is leading the Georgia prosecution—are the subjects of their own adoring memes and merchandise. One coffee mug available for purchase features Smith's face and the text SOMEBODY'S GONNA GET JACKED UP!

Perhaps this time will be different. With Trump out of office, Smith hasn't been limited, as Mueller was, by the Justice Department's internal guidance prohibiting the indictment of a sitting chief executive. Willis, a state prosecutor, operates outside the federal government's constraints. And neither Bill Barr nor Republican senators can stand between Trump and a jury.

The indictments against Trump have unfolded in ascending order of moral and political importance. In April, the Manhattan district attorney, Alvin Bragg, announced charges for Trump's alleged involvement in a hush-money scheme that began in advance of the 2016 election. In June came Smith's indictment of Trump in Florida, over the ex-president's hoarding of classified documents at Mar-a-Lago. Two months later, the

special counsel unveiled charges against Trump for his attempts to overturn the 2020 election. Willis's indictment in Georgia quickly followed, employing the state's racketeering statute to allege a widespread scheme to subvert the vote in favor of Trump. (He has pleaded not guilty in the first three cases and, as of this writing, was awaiting arraignment in Georgia. The Trump campaign released a statement calling the latest indictment "bogus.")

But each case has its own set of complexities. The New York one is weighed down by a puzzling backstory—of charges considered, not pursued, and finally taken up after all—that leaves Bragg's office open to accusations of a politically motivated prosecution. The indictment in Florida seems relatively open-and-shut as a factual matter, but difficult to prosecute because it involves classified documents not meant to be widely shared, along with a jury pool that is relatively sympathetic to Trump and a judge who has already contorted the law in Trump's favor. In the January 6 case, based in Washington, D.C., the sheer singularity of the insurrection means that the legal theories marshaled by the special counsel's office are untested. The sweeping scope of the Georgia indictment—which involves 19 defendants and 41 criminal counts—may lead to practical headaches and delays as the case proceeds.

Trump's army of lawyers will be ready to kick up dust and frustrate each prosecution. As of July, a political-action committee affiliated with Trump had spent about $40 million on legal fees to defend him and his allies. The strategy is clear: delay. Trump has promised to file a motion to move the January 6 proceedings out of Washington, worked regularly to stretch out ordinary deadlines in that case, and tried (unsuccessfully) to move the New York case from state to federal court. The longer Trump can draw out the proceedings, the more likely he is to make it through the Republican primaries and the general election without being dragged down by a conviction. At that point, a victorious Trump could simply wait until his inauguration, then demand that the Justice Department scrap the federal cases against him. Even if a conviction happens before Americans go to the polls, Trump is almost certain to appeal, hoping to strand any verdict in purgatory as voters decide whom to support.



CURRENTLY, THE COURT schedule is set to coincide with the 2024 Republican primaries. The Manhattan trial, for now, is scheduled to begin in March. In the Mar-a-Lago case, Judge Aileen Cannon has set a May trial date—though the proceedings will likely be pushed back. In the January 6 case, Smith has asked for a lightning-fast trial date just after New Year's; in Georgia, Willis has requested a trial date in early March. But still, what little time is left before next November is rapidly slipping away. In all likelihood, voters will have to decide how to cast their ballot before the trials conclude.

The pileup of four trials in multiple jurisdictions would be chaotic even if the defendant were not a skillful demagogue running for president. There's no formal process through which judges and prosecutors can coordinate parallel trials, and that confusion could lead to scheduling mishaps and dueling prosecutorial strategies that risk undercutting one another. For instance, if a witness is granted immunity to testify against Trump in one case, then charged by a different prosecutor in another, their testimony in the first case might be used against them in the second, and so they might be reluctant to talk.

In each of the jurisdictions, defendants are generally required to sit in court during trial, though judges might make exceptions. This entirely ordinary restriction will, to some, look politically motivated if Trump is not allowed to skip out for campaign rallies, though conversely, Trump's absence might not sit well with jurors who themselves may wish to be elsewhere. All in all, it may be

GUY CALI / GETTY

hard to shake the appearance of a traveling legal circus.

Attacking the people responsible for holding him to account is one of Trump's specialties. Throughout the course of their respective investigations, Trump has smeared Bragg (who is Black) as an "animal," Willis (who is also Black) as "racist," and Smith as "deranged." Just days after the January 6 case was assigned to Judge Tanya Chutkan, Trump was already complaining on his social-media site, Truth Social, that "THERE IS NO WAY I CAN GET A FAIR TRIAL" with Chutkan presiding (in the January 6 cases she has handled, she has evinced little sympathy for the rioters). Anything that goes wrong for Trump during the proceedings seems destined to be the subject of a late-night Truth Social post or a wrathful digression from the rally stage.

However damning the cases against Trump, they will matter to voters only if they hear accurate accounts of them from a trusted news source. Following each of Trump's indictments to date, Fox News has run segment after segment on his persecution. A *New York Times*/Siena College poll released in July, after the first two indictments, found that zero percent of Trump's loyal MAGA base—about 37 percent of Republicans—believes he committed serious federal crimes.

And beyond the MAGA core? A recent CBS News poll showed that 59 percent of Americans and 83 percent of self-described non-MAGA Republicans believe the investigations and indictments against Trump are, at least in part, attempts to stop him politically. Trump and his surrogates will take every opportunity to stoke that belief, and the effect of those efforts must be balanced against the hits Trump will take from being on trial. Recent poll numbers show Trump running very close to President Joe Biden even after multiple indictments—a fairly astonishing achievement for someone who is credibly accused of attempting a coup against the government that he's now campaigning to lead.

THE LAW CAN DO a great deal. But the justice system is only one institution of many, and it can't be fully separated from the broader ecosystem of cultural and political pathologies that brought the country to this situation in the first place.

After Robert Mueller chose not to press for an indictment of Trump on obstruction charges, because of Justice Department guidance on presidential immunity, the liberal and center-right commentariat soured on the special counsel, declaring him to have failed. If some Americans now expect Fani Willis or Jack Smith to disappear the problem of Donald Trump—and the authoritarian movement he leads—they will very likely be disappointed once again. Which wouldn't matter so much if serial disappointment in legal institutions—*he just keeps getting away with it*—didn't encourage despair, cynicism, and nihilism. These are exactly the sentiments that autocrats hope to engender. They would be particularly dangerous attitudes during a second Trump term, when public outrage will be needed to galvanize civil servants to resist abuses of power—and they must be resisted.

Trump's trials are perhaps best seen as one part of a much larger legal landscape. The Justice Department's prosecutions of rioters who attacked the Capitol on January 6 seem to have held extremist groups back from attempting other riots or acts of mass intimidation, even though Trump has called for protests as his indictments have rained down. Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel recently announced criminal charges alleging that more than a dozen Republicans acted as "fake electors" in an effort to steal the 2020 election for Trump—and as a result, would-be accomplices in Trump's further plots may be less inclined to risk their own freedom to help the candidate out. Likewise, some of those lawyers who worked to overturn the 2020 vote have now been indicted in Georgia and face potential disbarment—which could cause other attorneys to hold back from future schemes.

> THE JUSTICE SYSTEM CAN'T BE FULLY SEPARATED FROM THE ECOSYSTEM OF CULTURAL AND POLITICAL PATHOLOGIES THAT BROUGHT THE COUNTRY TO THIS SITUATION IN THE FIRST PLACE.

This is a vision of accountability as deterrence, achieved piece by piece. Even if Trump wins a second term, these efforts will complicate his drive for absolute authority. And no matter the political fallout, the criminal prosecutions of Trump are themselves inherently valuable. When Trump's opponents declare that "no one is above the law," they're asserting a bedrock principle of American society, and the very act of doing so helps keep that principle alive.

None of this settles what may happen on Election Day, of course, or in the days that follow. But nor would a conviction. If a majority of voters in a handful of swing states decide they want to elect a president convicted of serious state and federal crimes, the courts can't prevent them from doing so.

Such a result would lead to perhaps the most exaggerated disjunction yet between American law and politics: the matter of what to do with a felonious chief executive. If federal charges are the problem, Trump seems certain to try to grant himself a pardon—a move that would raise constitutional questions left unsettled since Watergate. In the case of state-level conviction, though, President Trump would have no such power. Could it be that he might end up serving his second term from a Georgia prison?

The question isn't absurd, and yet there's no obvious answer to how that would work in practice. The best way of dealing with such a problem is as maddeningly, impossibly straightforward as it always has been: Don't elect this man in the first place. *A*

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NIXON BETWEEN THE LINES

Alone in his study, ballpoint pen in hand, the president revealed himself in the margins of his books.

BY ANDREW FERGUSON

Call it coincidence, serendipity, an aligning of the planets—whatever the term, the moment was creepy and amusing all at once. I was beavering away in the basement research room at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, in Yorba Linda, a suburb of Los Angeles, when Henry Kissinger twice came into view—in the flat, cursive form of Nixon's scrawl in the margins of the book I was reading, and then in the rounder corporeal form of the man himself, in the hallway outside the door.

Kissinger, the last surviving member of Nixon's Cabinet, was in Yorba Linda last fall for two reasons: to speak at a fundraising gala for the Richard Nixon Foundation and to promote a book he had published earlier in the year, at the improbable age of 99. The book, *Leadership*, contains an entire chapter in praise of Nixon, the man who had made Kissinger the 20th century's only celebrity diplomat.

I was there to gather material for a Nixon book of my own. I had been nosing around in a cache of volumes from Nixon's personal library. I was particularly interested in any marks he may have left in the books he'd owned. From what I could tell, no one had yet mined this remarkably varied collection, more than 2,000 books filling roughly 160 boxes stored in a vault beneath the presidential museum. Taken together, they reflect the broad range of Nixon's intellectual curiosity—an underappreciated quality of his highly active mind. To give an idea: One heavily underlined book in the collection is a lengthy biography of Tolstoy; another is a book on statesmanship by Charles de Gaulle; another is a deep dive into the historiography of Japanese art. Several fat volumes of *The Story of Civilization*, Will and Ariel Durant's mid-century monument to middlebrow history, display evidence of attentive reading and rereading.

Every morning a friendly factotum would wheel out a gray metal cart stacked with dusty boxes from Nixon's personal library. On the afternoon Kissinger arrived, I had worked my way down to an obscure book published in 1984, a decade after Nixon left the White House. A significant portion of *Bad News: The Foreign Policy of The New York Times*, by a foreign correspondent for the New York *Daily News* named Russ Braley, is a blistering indictment of the *Times*' coverage of the Nixon administration. In Braley's telling, the *Times*' treatment swung between the unfair and the uncomprehending, for reasons ranging from negligence to malice.

The book had found its ideal reader in Richard Nixon. The pages of his copy were cluttered with underlining from his thick ballpoint pen. It occurred to me, as I followed along, that Nixon was being brought up short by his reading: Much of the material in *Bad News* was apparently news to him.

My reading was interrupted by a commotion outside the research room. I stuck my head out in time to see Kissinger and his entourage settling into the room across the hall. A group of donors and Nixonophiles had gathered to hear heroic tales of Nixon's statecraft.

I dutifully returned to Braley. When I got to a chapter on Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers, I found an unmistakable pattern: Most of Nixon's markings involved the man holding court across the hall. And Nixon wasn't happy with him. Kissinger, Braley wrote, had actually invited Ellsberg to Nixon's transition office in late 1968 to explicate his dovish views on Vietnam, more than two years before the Papers were released. Nixon's pen came down: exclamation point! Kissinger gave Ellsberg an office in the White House complex anyway, for a month in 1969—a stone's throw from the Oval Office. Slash mark! Kissinger spent his evenings "ridicul[ing]" Nixon "in private conversations with liberal friends." This last treachery summoned

the full battery of Nixon's marginalia: a slash running alongside the paragraph, a check mark for emphasis, and a plump, emphatic line under "liberal friends."

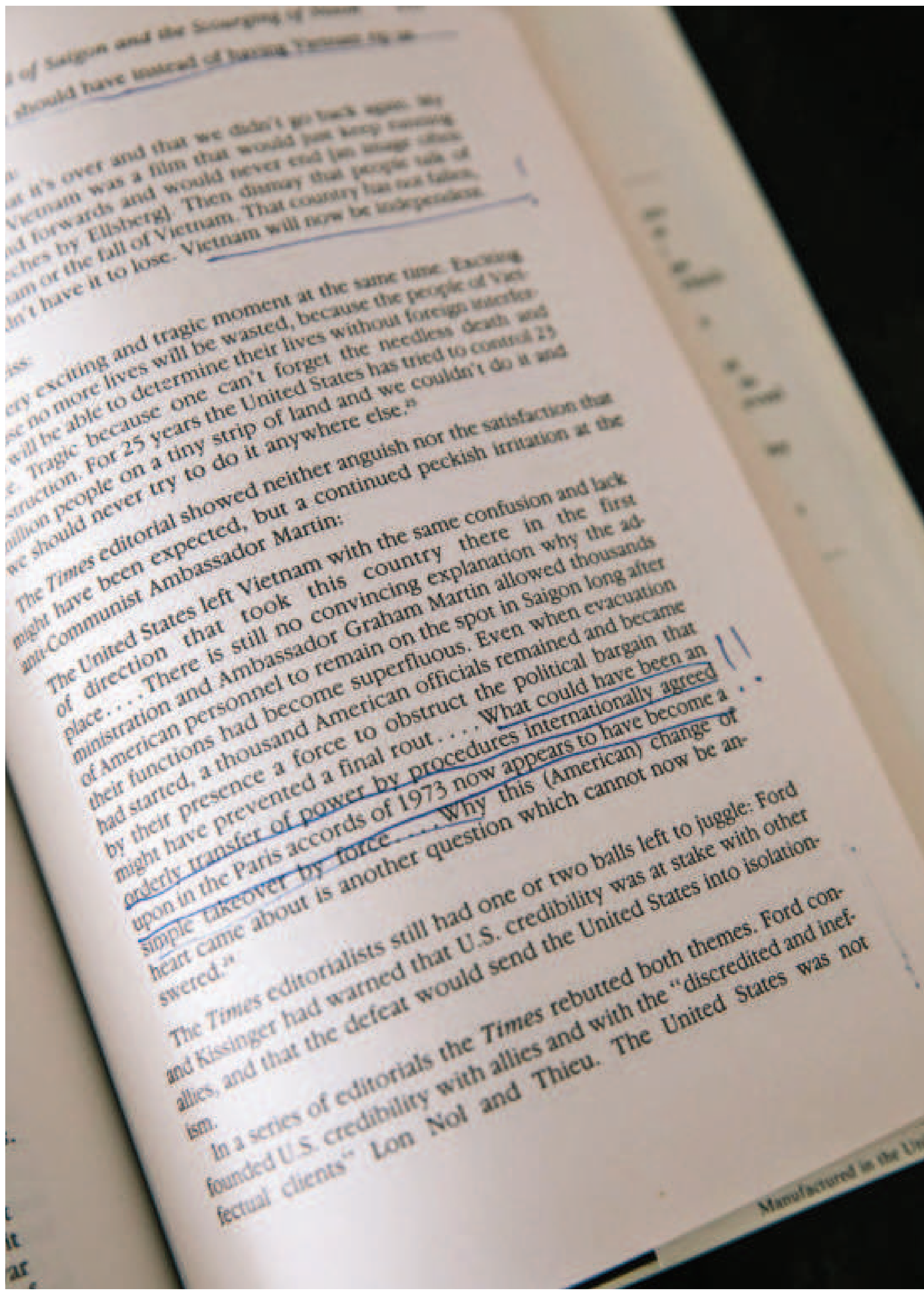
Still, Braley went on, when the Pentagon Papers were leaked, their publication alarmed Kissinger, because they posed a "double threat" to national security and to the conduct of foreign policy. "And to K!" Nixon wrote in the margin.

The contrast between Nixon's bitter hash marks about Kissinger from the 1980s and Kissinger's present-day celebration of his old boss offered a lesson in the evolving calculation of self-interest. It also conjured the image of a solitary old man in semiretirement, learning things about a now-vanished world he'd once thought he presided over. It happened often in the reading room in Yorba Linda: With unexpected immediacy, the gray metal cart carried the past into the present, in small but tangible fragments of Nixon himself.

THE TASK OF a marginalia maven is at right angles to the task of reading a book: It is an attempt to read the reader rather than to read the writer. For several decades now, scholars have been swarming the margins of books in dead people's libraries. Those margins are among the most promising sites of "textual activity," to use the scholar's clinical phrase—a place to explore, analyze, and, it is hoped, find new raw material for the writing of dissertations. Famous readers whose libraries have fallen under such scrutiny include Melville and Montaigne, Machiavelli and Mark Twain.

A book invites various kinds of engagement, depending on the reader. Voltaire (whom Nixon admired, to judge by his extravagant underlining in the Durants' *The Age of Voltaire*) scribbled commentary so incessantly that his marginalia have been published in volumes of their own. Voltaire liked to argue with a book. Nixon did not. He had a lively mind but not, when reading, a disputatious one; he restricted his marginalia almost exclusively to underlining sentences or making other subverbal marks on the page—boxes and brackets and circles. You get the idea that he knew what he wanted from a book and went searching for it, and when he found what he wanted, he pinned it to the page with his pen (seldom, from what I've seen, a pencil).

In his method, Nixon resembled the English writer Paul Johnson. I once asked Johnson how, given his prolific journalistic career—several



we should never try to do it anywhere else.

The *Times* editorial showed neither anguish nor the satisfaction that might have been expected, but a continued peckish irritation at the anti-Communist Ambassador Martin:

The United States left Vietnam with the same confusion and lack of direction that took this country there in the first place. . . . There is still no convincing explanation why the administration and Ambassador Graham Martin allowed thousands of American personnel to remain on the spot in Saigon long after their functions had become superfluous. Even when evacuation had started, a thousand American officials remained and became by their presence a force to obstruct the political bargain that might have prevented a final rout. . . . What could have been an orderly transfer of power by procedures internationally agreed upon in the Paris accords of 1973 now appears to have become a simple takeover by force. . . . Why this (American) change of heart came about is another question which cannot now be answered.

The *Times* editorialists still had one or two balls left to juggle: Ford and Kissinger had warned that U.S. credibility was at stake with other allies, and that the defeat would send the United States into isolationism.

In a series of editorials the *Times* rebutted both themes. Ford confounded U.S. credibility with allies and with the "discredited and ineffectual clients" Lon Nol and Thieu. The United States was not

Page 551 from Bad News: The Foreign Policy of The New York Times, *by Russ Braley*

columns and reviews a week in British and American publications—he managed to read all the books he cited in his own very long and very readable histories, which embraced such expansive subjects as Christianity, ancient Egypt, and the British empire. His reaction bordered on revulsion at my naivete. "Read them?!" he spat out. "Read them?! I don't read them! I fillet them!" As it happens, Nixon was an avid reader of Johnson, whose books he often handed out to friends and staff at Christmastime.

John Adams, another busy producer of marginalia, liked to quote a Latin epigram: *Studium sine calamo somnium*. Adams translated this as: "Study without a pen in your hand is but a dream." Nixon acquired the pen-in-hand habit early, as his surviving college and high-school textbooks show, and he kept at it throughout his life. For Nixon, as for the rest of us, marking up books was also a way of slowing himself down and attending to what he read. He was not a notably fast reader, by his own account, but his powers of concentration and memorization were considerable. Going at a book physically was a way of absorbing it mentally.

One of the most heavily represented authors in Nixon's personal library is Churchill, whom Nixon revered not only as a statesman but also as a historian and an essayist. Nixon's shelves sagged with Churchill's multivolume histories and biographies: *The World Crisis*, *Marlborough: His Life and Times*, *The Second World War*, *A History of the English Speaking Peoples*. Churchill's *Great Contemporaries*, a series of sketches he wrote in the 1920s and '30s sizing up roughly two dozen friends and colleagues, was clearly a favorite. When I retrieved Nixon's copy from a box, I found it dog-eared throughout.

Nixon's tastes ran heavily toward history, but he could be tempted away from the past to a book of present-day punditry, if the writer and point of view were agreeable. According to a report in *Time* magazine, when half a million citizens descended on Washington, D.C., in November 1969 to protest the Vietnam War, Nixon holed up in his private quarters with a book called *The Decline of Radicalism: Reflections on America Today*. The book, slim and elegant, had been sent to Nixon by its author, the historian Daniel Boorstin.



Judging by his notations, Nixon was interested less in Boorstin's turgid cultural analysis of "consumption communities" and more in his thesis that the ragged protesters gathering outside the White House fence constituted something new in American history: They were not radicals at all but nihilists. Nixon brought out the pen, and in Yorba Linda, a continent and decades away from his White House hideaway, I could still feel the insistent furrow of his underlining on the page. He marked several consecutive paragraphs in a section called "The New Barbarians," in which Boorstin criticized protesters for their "indolence of mind" and "mindless, obsessive quest for power."

People read books for lots of reasons: instruction, pleasure, uplift. This was Nixon reading for self-defense.

THE BOOK I MOST wanted to see in Yorba Linda was Nixon's copy of Robert Blake's biography *Disraeli* (1966). A re-creation of Nixon's favorite room in the White House was one of the Nixon museum's prime exhibits when it opened, in 1990, a few years before Nixon's death. (It has since been redesigned.) Nixon himself chose *Disraeli* to rest on his desk for the public to see. The book was given to him during his first year in the White House, in 1969, by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a Harvard professor, prominent Democrat, and future U.S. senator from New York. To the surprise of just about everybody, the year he took office, Nixon made Moynihan his chief domestic-policy counselor, a counterpart in those early days to Kissinger as head of the National Security Council. Despite Nixon's enduring image as a black-eyed right-winger, his political ideology was always flexible, if not flatly self-contradictory.

Moynihan the liberal hoped to persuade Nixon the hybrid to take Benjamin Disraeli, the great prime minister of Victorian Britain, as his model. Disraeli was a Tory and an imperialist, and at the same time a social reformer of vision and courage. According to Moynihan, Nixon read the book within days of receiving it. Soon enough, the president was calling himself a "Disraeli conservative." The precise meaning of the tag was clear to Nixon alone, but we can assume it underwent a great deal of improvisation and revision as his presidency wore on.

Disraeli's appeal to Nixon went beyond his light-footed

ideology. Speaking to his Cabinet at a dinner one evening in early 1972, Nixon called Disraeli a “magnificent” politician. Now, he went on, the “fashionable set today would immediately say, ‘Ah, politicians. Bad.’” As he saw it, the “fashionable set”—the epithet, suffused with reverse snobbery and class resentment, is pure Nixon—believed that politicians disdain idealism and think nothing of principle. “But,” Nixon said, “the pages of history are full of idealists who never accomplished anything.” It was “pragmatic men” like Disraeli “who had the ability to do things that other people only talked about.” Nixon, who had never shied away from calling himself a politician, wanted to see himself in Disraeli, or at least in Blake’s *Disraeli*—this “classic biography,” to which, he told his Cabinet, he often turned for inspiration on sleepless nights. And here the book was, Nixon’s own copy, at the top of my growing stack in Yorba Linda.

Disraeli is packed with observations about political tradecraft. They are penetrating, specific, and cold-blooded. The little dicta come from both the biographer and his subject. “He was a master at disguising retreat as advance,” Blake wrote approvingly. Nixon underlined that sentence, and then this one from Disraeli’s contemporary Lord Salisbury: “The commonest error in politics is sticking to the carcasses of dead policies.”

A line, a check mark, a circle—why Nixon deployed one notation and not another for any given passage is a question as unanswerable as “Why didn’t he burn the tapes?” But it was politics that always caught his eye, and activated his pen. Disraeli, Blake wrote, “suffered from a defect, endemic among politicians, the greatest reluctance to admit publicly that he had been in the wrong, even when the fault lay with his subordinates.” Another from Blake: Successful politicians “realize that a large part of political life in a parliamentary democracy consists not so much in doing things yourself as in imparting the right tone to things that others do for you or to things that are going to happen anyway.”

A LINE, A CHECK MARK, A CIRCLE—WHY NIXON DEPLOYED ONE NOTATION AND NOT ANOTHER FOR ANY GIVEN PASSAGE IS AS UNANSWERABLE AS “WHY DIDN’T HE BURN THE TAPES?”

Should we take marked passages like these, with their ironic acceptance of the fudging and misdirection called for in the political arts, as a gesture toward self-criticism on Nixon’s part? Probably not: Nixon knew himself better than psycho-biographers give him credit for, but self-awareness is not self-criticism. In his chosen profession, he took the bad with the good, and his casual, creeping concessions to the seamier requirements of politics are what eventually did him in.

If you go looking for them, you can see reflections of Blake’s *Disraeli* throughout Nixon’s presidency, encapsulated in enduring phrases here and there. It was in Blake that Nixon came across Disraeli’s famous description of “exhausted volcanoes.” Disraeli coined it to disparage the feckless time-servers in William Ewart Gladstone’s cabinet after they had been in office a few years. Nixon underscored not only “exhausted volcanoes” but the rest of the passage from Blake’s text: The phrase, Blake writes, “was no mere gibe … For the past year, the Government had been vexed by that combination of accidents, scandals and blunders which so often for no apparent reason seem to beset an energetic administration in its later stages.”

Nixon feared the same fate for his second term—a loss of energy and direction. The day after his landslide reelection, in 1972, he called together his Cabinet and senior staff. He told them of Disraeli’s warning about “exhausted volcanoes.” And then, with his chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, serving as the lord high executioner, he demanded their resignations en masse.

NOT EVERYTHING in Blake’s *Disraeli* caught Nixon’s interest; certainly not everything was useful to him. As I paged through, I saw there were many longueurs, stretches of several dozen pages, sometimes more, where no filleting of any kind happened. And then—inevitably, suddenly—Nixon the reader is seized by passages of sometimes thunderous resonance, and the pen is again called into play.

“Disraeli,” Blake writes, “really was regarded as an outsider by the Victorian governing class.” One can almost see Nixon sit bolt upright and pick up his pen. This is the same ostracism that Nixon himself felt keenly throughout his personal and professional life, in fact and in imagination. The following page and a half, discussing the disdain of the “élite” for Disraeli, is bracketed nearly in its entirety. Some sentences are boxed. Some passages, like this one, are underlined as well as bracketed:

> Men of genius operating in a parliamentary democracy … inspired a great deal of dislike and no small degree of distrust among the bustling mediocrities who form the majority of mankind.

The antagonism of the elites was not the determining fact of Disraeli’s career, but both biographer and subject perceived its profound effects, and so did the man reading about it 90 years after Disraeli’s death. As president, Nixon felt himself similarly situated: the political leader of an imperial nation, highly skilled, aching for greatness, yet in permanent estrangement from the most powerful figures of the politics and culture that surrounded him, nearly all of whom he judged, as Disraeli had, “bustling mediocrities.”

When reading about the elites, Nixon pressed the ballpoint deep into the page. We marginalia mavens, tracing our fingers across the lines today, can only guess, of course. But it may be that in 1969, sitting in the reading chair in his White House hideaway, he already sensed that this was not bound to end well. *A*

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Confronting the Unbelievable
Photograph by Irina Rozovsky

When the photographer Irina Rozovsky moved from Boston to Athens, Georgia, she began taking walks around her new neighborhood. She'd push her daughter's stroller to a nearby wooded path, trying to get the baby to sleep, and photograph what she could along the way. One day in 2018, after a storm, the path was flooded. A young girl stood in the bright sun at the edge of the murky water, observing the strange new scene before her—"confronting the unbelievable," as Rozovsky puts it. The image reminded Rozovsky of the fairy-tale trope of a child getting lost in the forest. "It's both a romance and a nightmare," she told me.

Rozovsky's untitled photograph will be on display this fall at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, as part of the exhibition "A Long Arc: Photography and the American South Since 1845." In an introduction to an accompanying book, the *Atlantic* contributing writer Imani Perry reflects on the 21st-century photographers who capture the region's distinctive landscapes with compositions that evoke a 19th-century sense of the sublime. In the South, Perry writes, "nature takes over everything that humans create and destroy."

Rozovsky insists that the work is not making an environmental statement. As a mother, she worries about the role that humans have played in warming the world her daughter will inherit. But as a photographer, she told me, she was drawn to this particular scene for its "serene and surreal" beauty, its unsettling scale.

A relative newcomer to the South, Rozovsky has been struck by the high drama of its nature. "It can be so wild," she said, even just down the street in Athens. She's not religious—but when trees fall, or a path floods like this, Rozovsky said, it can feel almost biblical. "There's something larger than us."

— Amy Weiss-Meyer

Irina Rozovsky. Untitled*, 2018. In* A Long Arc: Photography and the American South *(Aperture).*



Jenisha From Kentucky

I came to New York

sure of one thing—

that no one could

ever know my past.

By Jenisha Watts

Illustrations by Didier Viodé

M

Ms. Brown didn't tell me where we were going. I knew we would be visiting someone important, a literary figure, because we took a gypsy cab instead of the subway. It would probably be someone I should have known, but didn't.

A brownstone in Harlem. It was immaculate—paintings of women in headscarves; a cherry-colored oriental rug; a dark, gleaming dining-room table. Ms. Brown led me toward a woman on the couch. She knew that I would recognize her, and I did, despite the plastic tube snaking from her nostrils to an oxygen tank. Maya Angelou's back was straight. Her rose-pink eyeshadow sparkled.

My mind called up random bits of information from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Canned pineapples—she loved them. Bailey—her brother's name. What she felt when she heard someone read Dickens aloud for the first time—the voice that "slid in and curved down through and over the words." And that, like me, she had called her grandmother Momma.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Jenisha."

"Last name?" she shot back.

"Watts."

Maya Angelou now knew my name.

The party was for the poet Eugene B. Redmond. Amiri Baraka was there. The family of James Baldwin. And Nikki Giovanni, who once wrote—just to me, it felt like—"Though you're poor it isn't poverty that / concerns you."

By then I knew how to mingle with literary types at networking events. But I always felt like my worth was tied to my job, or my education, or my family background. This night was different. I didn't have to prove myself. It was assumed that everyone here was important, because who else would possibly be invited to Maya Angelou's brownstone? In my head, I created stories about who I might be to these people. Maybe I was a young poet of great promise, or a family friend of Maya's, or even her granddaughter. Having Maya Angelou as my grandmother would have been nice. Toni Morrison, too. And James Baldwin for a granddad.

I'd done this as a child as well, imagining who I could have been if I'd had a different kind of family. Who I could have been had my mother been a professor, an artist, a writer.

But I didn't grow up in a Harlem brownstone. I didn't have a professor or an artist or a writer for a mother. And Maya Angelou wasn't my grandmother.

I was Jenisha from Kentucky, and I was raised in a crack house.

AT THE CHARLOTTE COURT housing project in Lexington, Kentucky, the apartment complexes were all the same, the front yards bare dirt with patches of grass. Lexington is a very white city in an extremely white state, but the West End is Black. Lots of people were poor. I had a bubblegum-pink ten-speed that I would ride to the corner store, where older girls and I would steal Lemonheads and Now and Laters. In summer my brothers and sister and I would rush to Douglass Park to catch the free lunch truck. On weekends we'd bum money at the Plaza—the West End parking lot where people dressed up to sit on the hoods of their freshly washed cars.

The neighborhood was full of boys fighting. Once, my little brother Colby needed a haircut. Our mother, Trina, had no money for the barber, so she shaved

his head with a disposable razor. His tight coils covered our floor, and the next day all the kids on the school bus laughed at the nicks on his head.

On one of my birthdays—I was maybe 6 or 7—Trina let me have a party. No balloons or cake or gifts—just a few girls from the neighborhood going wild. We were upstairs when another mother knocked on the front door. "I told y'all you were not allowed over here," she said to her daughters.

I knew other people who used drugs, but what happened at our apartment was different. On any given day, folks would be in the bathroom or a bedroom getting high. In return, the dealers gave Trina free drugs. Our door was always opening and shutting, strangers entering and leaving. One evening my little brothers and sister and I were in our bedroom, coloring dinosaurs with green crayons. I was about 7. I was working hard to keep them busy so that Trina could enjoy her high. I don't remember Trina ever praising me for being a good big sister, but I heard her brag to a friend about how quiet we were when she left us alone. Coloring books kept us quiet, she said.

Sometimes the cops would come, four or five at a time. My siblings and I would lie in bed as they walked through our dark apartment with flashlights, their staticky walkie-talkies impossible to understand. In the morning we'd see that they'd trashed the place: flipped mattresses onto the floor, pulled out drawers. My Aunt Soso says they once found drugs hidden in the cereal boxes.

We knew why the police came. After they kicked in the door once, a man we'd never seen before handed Colby a bag of drugs to hide. And there were guns. I was standing on the stairs one night when I saw a man in a red jacket hand someone a gun that looked like a big, black Super Soaker. Trina made an "*oooh*" sound. I could tell she was nervous from the way she looked away from the gun.

One time, Trina went upstairs with a group of people to get high. I was crying. I yelled for her because I didn't want her to leave me downstairs without her. I noticed a man with hazel eyes and a mole on his face sitting in a chair, staring at me. "Do you want me to make you feel good?" he asked. My tears stopped. I knew that wasn't something a grown man should say to a child. I was in the third grade.

The police never took Trina to jail those nights, but sometimes they would handcuff her. Once, she was sitting on the couch with my sister Ebony crying in her lap. "Can I change her Pamper?" she asked. She needed them to take the handcuffs off first.

Trina was what I called her. Even when I was little, I never called her Momma.

I DON'T HAVE any photos of myself as a baby. I recently asked some relatives if they had any in their own albums. No one did, but a cousin sent me a photo of Trina at her high-school prom. Her hair was up and she wore a pastel-pink gown, tight around her tiny waist. She looked innocent. It was the kind of photo that proud daughters share on Instagram. Anyone could see how beautiful she was. I had never thought that about my mother before, that she had been beautiful once.

When I picture Trina, I see her in a hospital bed.

I was in New York City in 2010, at my desk at *People* magazine, when I got the call. Trina had overdosed and hit her head, or been beaten by her boyfriend (not for the first time), or maybe both. When I arrived at the hospital in Lexington, she was almost dead. The right side of her head had been shaved and stapled closed. She couldn't open one of her eyes, but when she saw me, a smile crawled across her face.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me first tell you a bit about Trina Renee Watts.

She was born on October 16, 1965, across town from where we would live as children. Her caramel skin is pimpled and she has a birthmark that resembles a bruise over her right eye. She has always enjoyed reading and writing, and English was her favorite subject in school. She ran track. They called her the next Wilma Rudolph—she was that fast.

She got accepted to Western Kentucky University, but dropped out when I was born, in January 1985. My father's name is Levi Fishback, and he met Trina at a club called Tommy Campbell's.



The author's mother, Trina Watts, at prom

COURTESY OF JENISHA WATTS

We would wake up and

Trina would be gone.

We wouldn't go to school.

We would sit like soldiers

on ambush and wait,

alert to any sound.

My sister JaShae was born a year and a half after me. Shay was high yellow, a quiet kid who rarely cried but would suck her thumb or shake her leg when she got anxious, and sniff Trina's shirts when she wasn't around.

When Shay was a baby, Trina started freebasing cocaine, and then she began using crack. When Shay was 11 months old, Trina started bleeding and bleeding, and she didn't know what was wrong. She woke up in the hospital, handcuffed to the bed, and learned that she'd given birth to another baby. She hadn't even suspected that she was pregnant. The baby was born with crack in his system and was in the neonatal ICU, covered in tubes, tiny enough to fit into her cupped hands. This was my brother Jacobbie—Colby.

Aaron was born just before Christmas in 1990, and our youngest sibling, Ebony, in 1992. All five of us have different fathers—I don't think Trina even knows who most of the dads are.

Trina would let me change Ebony's diaper like she was my doll. During a visit to a neighbor, the woman asked Trina, "Can I have Ebony?" as if that were normal, as if Trina might just hand her child over. She didn't, not that day. But a few months later, Ebony was sent to live with a relative, and she never came home again.

TRINA WAS NEVER MEAN, never hit us or screamed. She read us *Curious George*—the only book we owned. Sometimes she lifted us up on her feet, pretending we were airplanes, making engine noises. She put up a Christmas tree, even though we had few gifts. Once, an older boy was bullying me on the bus. I had a pencil in my hand and stabbed him on the top of his head. Stunned, he touched the spot, and blood colored his fingertip. That evening, his mother knocked on our door. "Trina, look at what your daughter did to my son," she said, showing her the mark on his head. Trina said, "Well, what did *he* do to *her*?" Trina was on my side.

Sometimes she would pack us into her bed and say, "I promise y'all. I'm going to stop using drugs."

But then we would wake up and Trina would be gone. We wouldn't go to school. We would sit like soldiers on ambush and wait, alert to any sound of chatter, footsteps, or clicking keys that would mean Trina was home. If someone knocked on the door, we knew to hush and not answer it.

One day, we were home alone, and I heard knocking. I was 7 or 8. I looked through the peephole. It was my dad. I opened the door and he walked in and looked around. Clothes were scattered everywhere and dirty dishes and trash littered the floor. We didn't have any food. We thought that he would take us back to his place, where he lived with his wife and stepdaughter, or at least give us something to eat. "I gotta get you out of here," he said. But he left and didn't come back.

Another day, I was wearing the same outfit I'd had on for a week, shorts and a tank top. My hair wasn't combed. Trina had brought us over to her friend's house, so the two of them could get high. The friend was balding and fat—I hadn't known that drug addicts could be fat. Inside, the smell of crack was strong—thicker than cigarette smoke, like someone who never brushed their teeth breathing directly into your nose—so I went outside to wander the neighborhood. I ran into a group of pretty, clean-dressed girls who scanned me up and down and whispered. I didn't like them. I didn't like my ugly sister Shay, or my nappy-headed brothers. They all reminded me of what those girls thought of me.

Once, when I was about 8, we were alone and hungry. Colby opened a can of cranberry sauce. One of us poured syrup on a piece of bread. If I'd had only myself to take care of, it wouldn't have been so bad, but as the oldest, I felt it was up to me to fix things. I decided to get my grandmother, Trina's mom, to help us.

My granny worked right across the street from Charlotte Court—she was a nurse for the Health Department. I crossed the two-lane road, pushed open the glass revolving door, and walked to the front desk. "Pat Dishman," I whispered to the secretary. She made me sign in. I pulled down my baseball cap and fixed my jacket. The women were dressed in blouses tucked into slacks. Some wore suits with heels. I had scratched-up legs and my teeth were so crooked that if I

smiled with my mouth shut, one poked out the side.

When I stepped off the elevator, I recognized one of my grandmother's friends, a white woman who offered me a Thin Mint and watched with concern as I gobbled it up. My granny wasn't in the office, but the friend said she'd let her know that I'd stopped by. Walking home, I wondered if her co-workers could see me through the windows. I was mad at myself for not being pretty.

"What the fuck are y'all looking at?" I asked Shay, Colby, and Aaron. I wanted Trina to stroll in so that I could cuss her out. *You stupid bitch!* I would tell her. *Crackhead! Where the fuck you been? We need food! I hate you!*

A knock on the door turned into a bang. It sounded like the police. But it was my granny, in a teal silk coat with fur around the hood. I unlocked the door, and she rushed in.

"Why did you come to my job?" she screamed. Her makeup, as always, was perfect, her lips a deep plum. "Why did you come to my job?"

"I didn't go to your job," I said, almost believing my own lie.

"Yes she did, Granny," Shay said. I wanted to smack her. I wanted to say, *You're uglier than me*.

"Don't you ever bring yo ass to my job," Granny said. She didn't ask where Trina was or how long she'd been gone, or offer to take us to McDonald's. She just left, slamming the door.

Another time, Trina disappeared for a few hours. We were waiting for her when the door to the closet opened and she walked out. That entire time, she'd been sitting in the closet, high. I can still see her long leg stepping out from behind the door. She moved like a nutcracker soldier, as if her body were made of wood. Her lips were pressed together, and she didn't acknowledge us at all. She just walked out of the apartment. We were too stunned to chase after her.

WHEN I WAS 9, we moved into the Salvation Army. Trina said it was because the police had damaged the apartment so badly during a raid that maintenance had to come and fix it up. We certainly hadn't been evicted, she told me, because our subsidized rent was only $50.

We ate at a brown table in the Salvation Army cafeteria and shared a bathroom with homeless people who mumbled to themselves as we brushed our teeth. We slept in a room that automatically went dark each night when the clock flashed curfew.

One day, Trina and two other mothers took us all to the park. They huddled by a tree as I sat on a park bench, keeping an eye on the little kids and on Trina. Two homeless men were pointing at our moms. One was shaking his head as if he was disappointed. I could see the fire from the lighter warming the crack pipe as Trina and the other women bent down and took turns.

I was surprised that she had found other women like her, other moms who enjoyed drugs. At the time, Trina was on crutches because she had gotten in a fight and broken her foot. *Even hopping around on one foot*, I thought to myself, *she still wants to get high*.

Aaron came down with a bad fever at the Salvation Army. He was in Trina's lap, his head on her chest. Ordering an ambulance was going to be expensive, but Trina didn't hesitate—she just wanted to make sure her baby boy was okay. Right then, she seemed like a normal mother.

MY AUNTS, Chantelle and Soso, came to the Salvation Army with a U-Haul to get me. I sat between them. The drive to Tallahassee was bumpy and long, the inside of the truck hot and sticky. But Florida, when we got there, was peaceful and sunny and had palm trees. I moved into Aunt Chantelle's apartment, where she shared one room with her baby son and I shared the other with my 7-year-old cousin, Kiki.

Aunt Chantelle had just graduated from Florida State University and was working at Target. She tried to give me a normal life. We ate dinner at a table and had Fruit Roll-Ups for snacks. I was in the fourth grade at Apalachee Elementary School, and every day my hair was done and I had proper clothes to wear. Once, when it rained, she let Kiki and me run around until we were soaked. We filled buckets up with rainwater, which she told us was good for our hair.

But many days, I would walk down to a payphone near a convenience store, where I could call my granny collect to ask about Trina and my siblings. That's how I learned that the state had taken them away. Shay was living with my granny's sister, Jamie. The boys were in foster care with a Jehovah's Witness. They were all gone.

The adults seemed to have known that this was the likely outcome—that's why I'd been sent away, to keep me out of the system. But I felt so guilty for leaving, like it wouldn't have happened if I had been there, like I was the only one who could protect them. There were two boys in the neighborhood who reminded me of my brothers; one had the same box haircut as Aaron. I'd knock on their door and ask if they could play, when all I really wanted was to watch as they wrestled on the playground.

I had a journal with a red-ribbon placeholder that I wrote in about Trina's addiction and how much I missed my siblings. One time, I left it out in plain view, where I knew my aunts would find it. That night, I sat with my ear against the wall, listening as Aunt Soso read my journal over the phone to my granny.

I was beginning to see that writing things down, naming them, could make other people feel things. I felt freer writing than I did speaking out loud. I discovered books in Florida too. I lived in my head and went wherever the stories took me—into the world of a boy who learned that he was diabetic because he always had to pee; or a redheaded, freckled kid who wiped his runny nose with his shirt; or a rich kid who was new to school and tried to use his money to make friends. Reading was the only time when I didn't think about Trina or my siblings.

I LIVED IN FLORIDA for more than a year. Then the state of Kentucky gave Trina another chance. Shay, Aaron, Colby, and I all moved into our grandmother's house—the three-bedroom house on Valley Farm Drive where Trina had grown up. Trina wasn't permitted to live with us yet, but she visited on

weekends. She was in rehab and working at Hardee's. One evening, she came by with another woman—her caseworker, I think—to bring me a birthday card and a Butterfinger, my favorite candy. When she was sober, Trina would do my hair. She knew how to do cornrows in elaborate designs, any style I wanted. She took her time, and her hands were gentle.

It was a different world from the projects. My granny was a master sergeant in the Army Reserve, and she was strict, but she took care of us. She worked every day, so she'd get us up early and I'd dress Aaron for day care. We'd sing the Barney song together. We had a yard to play in, and at night, we all slept in the same bed under a blanket covered in faded-pink strawberries, me in the middle with my arms around my siblings.

Granny threw us birthday parties, too. I had a party at a skating rink with a Mickey Mouse cake. She pushed me to work hard at school, though I didn't always listen, and she got a tutor for Colby, who was struggling.

My dad would make the occasional appearance. One time, he promised to take me to the zoo. The night before, I ironed my black jeans until they had a white crease from the starch. I even ironed my cotton panties. I was picturing the day to come: He would take me to the gift shop and to McDonald's. He'd let me order anything on the menu.

In the morning, I wore my favorite purple sweater and new white ribbons in my pigtails. I went outside to wait, because waiting outside would help speed his arrival. I watched the road, leaving my post only to go to the bathroom, or to answer the ringing phone. I hoped it was him, calling to assure me that he was on his way. "He's not coming, Jenisha," my granny kept saying. I waited until the sun set. He didn't even call the next day, or the day after that.

TRINA GOT US kids back, but she began doing drugs again, too. I was always asking if I could go to my granny's, because it was calmer there. So I wasn't with my siblings on the day when Trina dropped them off with the woman who took care of Ebony. When she didn't come back to get them, the woman called social services and reported her. I stayed with my granny while Colby, Aaron, and Shay ended up back in foster care. We never lived together again.

At Christmas, I would pick out gifts, wrapping them in forest-green paper with a Black Santa pattern. But I never saw my siblings during the holidays. Once New Year's came, I'd put the gifts in the attic. Eventually I stopped buying new ones. I brought the old presents down again and again, until the wrapping paper faded and tore.

I didn't cry. I just pushed away my emotions and eased into my new life. I had my own bedroom; the telephone worked, and the cable did too. Eventually my granny paid for me to get braces—a status symbol in my middle-school eyes. Only white kids, and Black kids from two-parent homes, had braces.

My sister Shay lived with Aunt Jamie in the projects and we went to the same school, one grade apart. She did endless chores and rarely had any new clothes. I used to make fun of her high-water pants. One weekend, when I was visiting, she took my wide-legged jeans. When I saw them on her at school, I tried to fight her. No one knew why—most of our classmates didn't even know we were sisters.

Shay probably had it worst of all my siblings. She moved out as soon as she turned 18 and got pregnant with her first baby around then. I wasn't much of a sister to her. I wanted to close the door on that part of my life. And I wanted to make my granny proud.

Granny was always warning me that I could turn out just like "your mammy." I was desperate for her to see me as a beautiful girl, a girl who was nothing like my mother. Maybe that's why I started calling her Momma. And for a while, she let me. But one day, I walked into her room and said, "Momma," and she looked up at me over her reading glasses. "I'm not your momma," she said.

I WASN'T LONELY when I was reading. And in my diary, I could say whatever I wanted, name every insecurity. Words also pulled me closer to other people—like Contessa, who had hair that ran past her shoulders and got high scores on her papers, and yet was still my friend. Both of our mothers had been in jail, and we shared the letters that they had written to us from inside.

I was a collector of words. In sixth grade I learned the meaning of *dumbfounded* from a vocabulary test. I liked the fullness of the word and how it rolled off my tongue.

I felt the same about the word *perplexed*. Tom Joyner, the radio host, said "I'm perplexed" during an interview, and as soon as the word landed on my ears, I knew what he meant. I learned *epitome* from a TLC song, and *regurgitate* from a friend's letter about her abortion.

Words were the only things that seemed attainable to me. I could look them up in my grandmother's dictionary and understand their meaning—unlike math, where, if I was stuck, I'd need someone to help me. The more words I learned, the more I realized that my own language could be deepened.

My grandmother worked a lot, and when she was home, she'd stay in her room. One day she said, "I got you some pads." I thought, *Wow, she got me some writing pads*. But when she didn't make eye contact with me, I realized that she meant something else. She must have noticed the blood on my laundry. She didn't like the word *period*—she thought *cycle* was more polite.

When I was home alone, I would read her *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines, and the laminated aphorisms and poems she'd hung on the wall. My favorite was called "Don't Quit": "When things go wrong, as they sometimes will, / When the road you're trudging seems all uphill …"

TRINA MOVED IN with Granny and me when I was about 15. We fought a lot—I thought she owed me for choosing drugs over being a mother. Once, I asked her to do my hair. She said no, and suddenly I was furious. I called her a crackhead and punched her. And then I picked up a pair of scissors and cut off a chunk of her hair.

Granny called the cops on me. I was handcuffed and driven to a juvenile detention center. They made me strip in a cold room, and a white female officer



DIDIER VIODÉ

inspected my body. I told someone there that I wanted to kill myself, so I had to wear a special shirt, alerting everyone that I was on suicide watch, until they let me go home a few days later.

Around that time, I read *The Color of Water*, James McBride's memoir about his white mother's life, in which he tries to understand his identity as a Black man. I wasn't a diligent student, but I knew what I liked, and I liked James McBride. He wasn't a great student either—"my high school grades were sour, my SATs low," he wrote. He stole and did drugs. And yet he made a life from words.

Everyone around me wanted to go to the University of Kentucky. Many of my friends got in. But my ACT score was so embarrassingly low that when I saw it, I balled up the paper and hid it under the couch. I would have to do two years of community college first.

I kept this a secret. Community-college kids lived on the same campus as the University of Kentucky students, so even as my granny and Trina moved me into my dorm room, they had no idea that I hadn't gotten in.

I was placed in remedial classes, where I learned basic things that I should have been taught in grade school. One semester, I had to select a word and write a paper illustrating it. My word was *condescending*.

But eventually, I was able to transfer to the University of Kentucky. I got a UK ID with my picture on it, and a UK wallet to put it in. Sometimes I'd pull out my ID and stare at it.

My friend Carrie was an English major and a writer. She was so free with her language, and could enunciate long, peculiar words. We'd sit on her dorm-room bed and share lines that moved us. She helped me tune my ears to the music of writing.

Another friend handed me *The Fire Next Time* and said, "You need to know this man." I loved that James Baldwin wasn't handsome like Langston Hughes. I read that he was often called ugly, ridiculed for his "frog eyes," and for the gap in his grin and his African nose. I saw beauty in him, but more than that, I admired how his intellect transcended what others thought about him.

I heard about a creative-writing professor who was supposed to be incredible, a poet. One day, I was walking with a friend, and we saw a tall, bronze-skinned woman with gold-streaked locs. My friend turned to me and said, "There she is!"

Nikky Finney. We were like teenagers spotting their favorite musician. I had listened many times to a clip of Professor Finney reading her poem "The Greatest Show on Earth," about Saartjie Baartman, the Hottentot Venus. She wrote about "the spectacle / of being a Black woman," and the "pornographic hands / fascinated with difference" that dissected her.

In the spring of 2007, I got to take Professor Finney's class. She acted like words were living, breathing, sacred things—like writing was serious. "Take a word on a date," she would tell us. One day, I submitted a poem called "Threadless." I used the word *panacea*, and when I read it aloud, I pronounced it "panaysha." Professor Finney stopped the class. "Never use a word you don't know how to pronounce," she said. I think she felt that I had disrespected the word.

And yet she was curious about me, and asked me about my life and my interests, and that made me stand up a little taller around her. She was the one who realized

how much help I still needed with grammar and arranged for a tutor, a graduate student who worked with me on diagramming sentences and the parts of speech. I resented it then, but now when I look back at the emails I was sending at that time, I cringe—they're riddled with basic errors. And no one told me. Professor Finney was the first teacher who told me the truth.

AS SOON AS classes ended, I was gone. I left Kentucky for New York on a Greyhound bus with a few hundred dollars in my bank account and two suitcases: one with my professional clothes—a pair of black slacks, a pair of gray slacks, a few collared shirts, my flower-printed sundresses—and the other stuffed with Shay's blow-up mattress. It was August 2008, and five days earlier I had gotten a temp job at *Essence* magazine—$10 an hour to help move stories from an old version of the website to a new one.

The trip took 20 hours. I tried to lay my head against the window and sleep, but I couldn't. It was late when the bus pulled into Manhattan. My plan had been to spend that first night in a hotel. I found one near the Port Authority, but when I tried to go inside, the doorman lied and said it was closed. I think he thought I was homeless. Instantly, I regretted my travel outfit—sneakers and jeans, my hair undone beneath a baseball cap.

I was too scared to try another hotel. Instead I called the young woman who had offered to host me that first month—the daughter of one of my college mentors—and asked if I could show up right away. The taxi to Brooklyn cost a fortune.

I had no idea how to navigate this new world. But I was a very good beggar. As a child, I would approach anyone who looked remotely willing and able and ask them for money to buy my siblings and me a value meal at Rally's. When I was 8, success meant that we would get burgers and fries for dinner, instead of nothing. Later, it meant a mentorship, an interview, a job.

I had gotten my first position at *Essence*—an internship—thanks to Susan Taylor, the editorial director. I loved the magazine because it was full of stories about successful Black women, and every month I'd see Susan's face, smiling in the back of the book. In Kentucky, I'd gone to a talk she was giving, offered to carry her bags, and told her all about my ambitions.

At the office, I would watch people I admired, anyone who seemed proper and smart, and try to do what they did. I could make it in New York, I told myself, if I worked hard, wore all black, and persuaded people to look after me. I asked anyone I thought could help me for advice, or a connection. Most people, like Susan, were generous and kind, but there was also the occasional humiliation.

One time I was having lunch at a French restaurant with another editor from *Essence*. I was proud because I had connected with him over our shared experience of growing up in a small town. As we were walking back to the Time & Life Building, I told him how nice it was to "conversate" with him. "Did you just say 'conversate'?" he asked, and my face burned.

I was always a fast eater, but I'd never thought to be ashamed of it until I was having lunch with a beautiful editor from a different magazine. I guess I made a mess with the bread crumbs. Even though she was Black herself, she asked, "Why do you Black girls eat like that?"

EVERY WEDNESDAY, I went to Hump Day—a happy hour for young Black professionals where everyone talked politics and seemed to have answers to all sorts of serious questions. The men wore suits and ties and the women all reminded me of Michelle Obama: ambitious, credentialed, supremely confident. Most were Jack-and-Jill groomed. They came from intact families that understood the concept of internships. They didn't drink Olde English, and they knew how to eat spaghetti correctly. They read books at the summer houses of their parents, parents who sent *them* money—not the other way around.

At Hump Day, I hid my past. They knew I was from Kentucky, which was foreign enough. They'd complain about boarding school and I'd say, *Yeah, my private school was horrible too*. I told myself I wasn't technically lying—I *had* attended a magnet school with a dress code: khaki pants and collared shirts.

Growing up, I'd never wanted to be white, just the right kind of Black. I'd always assumed that I was proper: I didn't have children out of wedlock; I wasn't a ho; I went to college. I had never thought much about class, but I'd never met Black people like these before.

My deficiencies haunted me: my childhood, my accent, my lack of knowledge. Silly things, like the fact that I'd never seen the movies that well-off Black kids had all watched: *Coming to America*, *Harlem Nights*. I asked "Where you at?" instead of "Where are you?" I talked quietly because I was never certain I was saying the words correctly. When I said "picture," people heard "pitcher." Eventually, I trained myself to always say "photo." I even found an acting coach online who agreed to give me voice lessons to try to change my accent, and we practiced on monologues in her studio.

I told one Hump Day guy named Brandon that I was planning a trip to Paris. He asked if I spoke French and I said, "Conversational." All I could say was *Bonjour* and *Je m'appelle Jenisha*, and I definitely wasn't flying to Europe. Each month many of my credit cards went delinquent. After Sprint turned my cellphone off, my granny shipped me one that had belonged to her dead ex-husband, Big Dishman, with one instruction: Don't erase his voice from the greeting. So whenever I missed someone's call, they'd hear a man's deep voice telling them to leave a message.

At work I never met anyone with a background like mine, and I knew why; only people with money could afford to be paid so little. There were times when I couldn't pay for lunch. One day, I walked into a Chase bank to withdraw $2—just enough for a hot dog and chips. I probably had about $5 in my account, but the teller wouldn't let me make the withdrawal. She handed me a $5 bill from her own wallet instead.

I thought constantly about my family. Colby was mixed up in drugs and getting in trouble. Aaron was married and raising two sons with his high-school sweetheart; Shay was living in a three-bedroom house with her boyfriend and four kids. I was closest then to Shay and her children, especially my oldest niece. I didn't go home

much, but when I did, I'd take her to the bookstore and spend more than I could afford on *Junie B. Jones*. My family knew I was working at a glamorous job in New York City, so they assumed I had money. I was too proud to tell them otherwise.

IN OCTOBER 2010, I got that call about Trina in the hospital. A friend loaned me the cash for a plane ticket so I could make it to her bedside.

The note on her chart read: "Pt. has no bone flap on right side." The doctors had taken it out because her brain was swollen and bleeding from a hematoma. The intake nurse had written that the details surrounding how she'd arrived at the hospital were "sketchy at best."

"You came all the way from New York to check on me," Trina whispered. She was wearing a diaper, and I changed it for her. She said thank you. She was too weak to use her arms, so I helped feed her a sloppy cheeseburger, watery mustard soaking the bun.

Trina's longtime boyfriend, Tim, had called an ambulance because she wouldn't wake up. She had been high, and it looked as if Tim had beaten her up. He told me that wasn't true, and claimed that she had overdosed. But I had witnessed him hitting Trina many times. They're still together, and I asked him recently why he hit her so often. "She was crazy," he said. "She's still crazy."

Sitting beside her, I couldn't bat down the flashbacks. I saw Tim pull her up by her hair like a fisherman would lift a trout. I saw her jaw widening to scream.

"What year is it?" I asked her.

"1985," she said.

"Who is the president?"

"Bush."

"*What year* is this?"

"You just heard me say what year it is," she said. Her memory was draining away like spilled water.

Whenever Trina woke up, I would ask her what I should do: Should I go back to New York? And she always said yes. "Go back. You got a dream there." I asked if she had any advice for me, and she said, "Don't be smart all your life. Always be yourself no matter who's around. You live and you learn and you learn to live."

After a day or two, she started asking me for crack. She moved her mouth from side to side as if her lips were playing an invisible harmonica. Spit bubbled on her lips. She didn't even know who I was anymore. She pleaded with me: "I want a hit."

My friends in New York had no idea what was going on. My bosses just knew that my mom was sick. She's still in critical condition, I told them. I wanted them to believe she was dying of cancer or something.

She survived that injury, survived withdrawal, and then went back on crack. For at least a year, she had to wear a protective helmet. I just went back to New York.

One night not long after I returned, I was covering a celebrity event for *People*. Ne-Yo was performing, and my assignment was to interview him after his set. I got the VIP treatment, skipping the crowd and sipping free cocktails. We talked about his work and his children. It was just a normal night in my new life. But on the long commute home, I started sobbing. I didn't understand what was happening. What if someone I knew saw me crying? I couldn't stop. I could barely breathe.

I'D SLEPT in a walk-in closet, stayed with acquaintances, lived for a while with a boyfriend. I couldn't afford rent. But I needed a steady place to live, and a family friend from Kentucky finally connected me with Marie Brown.

Ms. Brown was a literary agent who championed Black writers and artists, and she had a habit of taking in young people who needed help. Her Harlem brownstone was a library. Magazines and newspapers were piled everywhere. And books and books and books. She looked at me skeptically while I pretended to have a reasonable plan for the future. At last she offered me a room for a few months, until I got on my feet. I stayed for four years.

Much of the time, I could hide my inadequacies by working hard. Not with Ms. Brown. One day in the kitchen, she told me to add two measurements, but my math was wrong. "Why don't you know anything about numbers?" she asked. She ordered me some basic math books, and gave me a card with different percentages on it for tipping.



The author in sixth grade

COURTESY OF JENISHA WATTS

She gave me beauty advice too—wear sunscreen, scrub your elbows—things I'd never discussed with Trina or my granny. When I ate quickly, Ms. Brown would tell me, "Take your time, Jenisha. Don't pick up the entire piece of bread; break off a small piece and eat it. Dip the spoon in the soup and slowly bring it to your mouth."

But the main thing she had me do was read. Read until I couldn't read anymore.

She was always saying "I left that for you." Her living-room table was covered in magazines and manuscripts, but amid the pandemonium I always knew exactly which article was meant for me. When I was at work, she'd email me links to breaking news, with the subject "Did you read this?" I'd reply, "No, I didn't hear about it. I'll check it out." And she'd write back, "What type of journalist are you?"

Whenever I was being small-town or closed-minded, or acting like a victim of circumstance, she'd say, "Quit being Kentucky."

Ms. Brown wasn't my only mentor; I had a string of them—women who talked to me about writers like Sylvia Plath, taught me how to fact-check, and invited me over for holiday dinners. But one of the most influential was someone I never met: Helen Gurley Brown, the legendary editor of *Cosmopolitan*.

One day I found, on the pile left out for me, a review of a new biography of Brown called *Bad Girls Go Everywhere*. I couldn't understand at first why I needed to read about this plain-faced white woman. But I did, and then I ordered Brown's own book.

Helen Gurley Brown grew up in Arkansas. "I *never* liked the looks of the life that was programmed for me—ordinary, hillbilly, and poor," she wrote. She quoted Carson McCullers: "'I must go home periodically to renew my sense of horror.'" She called herself a "mouseburger"—the kind of woman who wasn't Marilyn Monroe beautiful but knew how to work hard and highlight her best features. She understood me: "You may not be an intellectual or a scholar, but you *are* 'street smart.' Like a little forest animal, you are quick and adaptable. You 'know' things."

One night I saw a tweet about *The Messenger*, by Charles Wright. I'd never heard of Wright, and I immediately ordered a copy. I found his *New York Times* obituary. A quote from his editor drew me in. "He was a very strange man, and after we met I thought, 'Well, this is not going to work.'" Then "he turned in the most perfect manuscript I'd ever received."

Wright may have lacked technical skill, but raw talent throbbed beneath his sentences. He wrote about walking through Rockefeller Center with a book in his hands, "sneezing and reading Lawrence Durrell, dead drunk from the explosion of his words. I suddenly looked up and encountered the long face of Steven Rockefeller. He seemed startled. Doesn't he think poor people read?"

Wright was an outsider in New York, trying to straddle two worlds. His grandmother had raised him in Missouri after his mother died of typhoid fever. He wanted to be a writer but worked as a messenger, walking through the "rainy New York streets" until his shoes were soaked through.

"I cannot connect the fragments of my life," he wrote.

Wright was sad, with pockets full of ambition. And so was I.

AROUND THIS TIME, I applied to Columbia Journalism School. I did it secretly, because I was sure I wouldn't get in. But I did. All of my reading had paid off. For the first time, thanks to graduate-school loans, I could afford to live comfortably.

I called home to share the news, but no one had heard of Columbia before. "Where's that?" my granny asked. I told her that Barack Obama had gone there.

Now, whenever I went out with the Hump Day crowd, people asked me for book recommendations. "You have to read *Liar's Poker*," I'd say. "You'd really love *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*." The truth is, I hadn't even read some of the books I recommended; I'd just heard about them while listening to Ms. Brown and her literary friends, or read the reviews that told me they were important.

In 2011, my old professor Nikky Finney was nominated for a National Book Award for Poetry, and she invited me to go to the ceremony with her. I was in the audience when she won, and gave an acceptance speech that soon went viral: "Black people were the only people in the United States ever explicitly forbidden to become literate." That, she said, "still haunts every poem I make."

She invited me again two years later, when she was a judge. I met James McBride, and I told him that his book had changed my life. When he won, for *The Good Lord Bird*, I cheered and cheered.

The next year, I graduated from Columbia. Ms. Brown was throwing me a party, and I invited a bunch of my mentors, as well as Aunt Soso, Trina, and my granny. I had helped get some money together for Trina to ride that same Greyhound bus I'd once taken. But then I changed my mind. She was getting high a lot then, and I didn't want to babysit her. So I called her back and said to forget about it, that I didn't want her to come after all. She didn't ask why.

My granny didn't come either. I had so wanted her to see my life—my studio apartment with its bookshelves of novels and biographies, the campus filled with brilliant professors. But at the last minute she made an excuse and said she couldn't come. Many people were there to support me, but not the two women who'd raised me.

MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS and I have never talked much about our childhood. When I went to live with my granny, I became something like an only child, and each year their absence became easier to accept. Alone, I was able to rewrite my own story: I had a good life. I went to Florida every spring break and swam with my cousins. I decorated my own room. I had only myself to look after. I tried to bury the rest of it in the ground, and I was surprisingly successful. But our silence had a cost.

Last year, I started writing what I thought would be an essay about my start in journalism, but I kept getting pulled back and back. I couldn't write about myself without writing about my family.

I always knew that I had privileges my brothers and sisters didn't have. All this time I thought that Colby and Aaron had lived with a nice foster family, but I found out this year that Colby, struggling with behavioral issues, had been sent away to


Maya Angelou
I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings
The Messenger
CHARLES WRIGHT
Langston Hughes
NOTES OF A NATIVE SON
JAMES BALDWIN

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live in a series of group homes when he was 9 or 10. How could I not have known that? "You were just off in your own little world," he told me. "We were all off in our own little worlds."

He told me about a time when he was alone downstairs in our apartment, and the cops barged in. He'd gotten a teddy bear on a school trip to some kind of medical clinic, and it had a big bandage on it. Someone was hurt during the raid. I'm not sure what happened—or how much of this is the dream logic of a traumatized child—but he said that "somebody took my Band-Aid off my teddy bear because they was bleeding that bad."

"I was so mad," he said. "I loved that teddy bear."

Listening to his memories, I felt like a wound was reopening inside me.

I talked with my aunts and my great-aunts, with my granny's cousin and childhood friend. But the one person who didn't want to talk was my granny.

"You don't want to open that can of worms," she said.

I ALWAYS SAW CRACK as the source of my family's problems. But I learned that addiction went back in our family long before the crack epidemic—as did poverty and neglect.

Irvin Smith, my granny's cousin, is the most educated member of our family—he has a doctorate in behavioral and analytical psychology and worked as a clinical consultant for the state of Kentucky. Ours, Irvin told me, was a "female-dominated family." The women were always getting in hair-pulling, skillet-raising fights—"mother-daughter fights" about the things "that all mothers and daughters argue about: the daughter's boyfriends, the grandkids." They lived in the '40s, '50s, and '60s in a part of Lexington called the Bottoms, where the juke joints were, where people went to drink and fight.

My granny was raised mostly by her grandmother, Addie Mae Fields, who worked in the Southwestern Tobacco factory and wove beautiful baskets out of tobacco leaves. My granny's mother worked in the factory too. Both her mother and grandmother drank heavily. Granny's mother died suddenly in her sleep, in her early 40s or even younger.

My granny was 14 or 15 when she became a mother, to a baby girl who died. Trina was born the year after. Her father's name is Walter Watts. Walter's childhood was one of real deprivation. He told me that his mother gave him up and that he lived "in the streets." He was "the neighborhood child—people in the neighborhood at different houses would buy clothes for me, and I would have to go to their house to take a bath."

He was addicted to heroin, then to crack. "Drugs do not allow you to be a parent," he told me. "They consume your whole life."

So why did he use them? "My mother didn't love me, so how could anybody else love me? That's the way I always looked at it."

When I asked people in my family why their lives had gone so off track, they all seemed to point to the same thing: this void where a mother's love was supposed to be.

"You try to close that void, but it never happens," Walter said. "At least it hasn't happened for me."

"My mother never, never wanted me," Trina said. "She never wanted me."

TRINA WAS IN the shower one day when she heard the bathroom door opening. She was 14 and would normally have been at school, but it was a snow day. The shower curtain came back fast and there was her stepfather's towering body. She started crying and yelled out, "No, no, please, no!" He grabbed her naked body. "I was fighting and fighting and fighting," and he was "taking his hands and sticking them up in me." He pulled her from the shower and slammed her on the bed he shared with her mother.

"He raped me," she said.

I'd known for years that Trina had said she was raped by my granny's husband, Big Dishman—the man whose phone I'd inherited. But we'd never talked about it. This year I finally asked her to tell me what happened.

Eventually, she got free and "ran out of the house with no clothes on all the way up the hill" to a friend's house. "Snow was on the ground; it was cold, but I can't remember being cold. I was just trying to get away."

At some point the police were called, and Big Dishman was arrested. Trina said she was taken to the hospital, where doctors examined her. Trina told me that her mother picked her up from the hospital and then went straight to the police station to bail Big Dishman out.

The local paper reported his arrest: "Police Charge Man With Raping Juvenile," read the headline. "William R. Dishman, 42, of 1000 Valley Farm Drive, has been charged with second degree rape."

I didn't know Big Dishman well. He and my granny separated long before I moved in with her, so I don't remember seeing him much growing up, and he died in 2005. I couldn't find any court records, so I'm not sure what happened after he was released, or whether there was a trial.

But I asked Irvin what he remembered. He said that when my grandmother found out about the abuse, she kicked Big Dishman out. He said she was the one who called the police. But then she took him back in. "You gotta remember," Irvin said: "He was still the father of three of her children."

In Trina's memory, Granny was angry at *her*—as if she'd seduced Big Dishman and then lied about it. She was mad at Trina's younger sister Soso too. One time, Soso told me, when she was in high school, Big Dishman walked into her room naked and said, "I will give you $20 if you let me eat your pussy." Soso, like Trina, went on to struggle with addiction, though she's been clean for decades; my granny has a similarly strained relationship with her.

When I asked my granny about the sexual abuse, she accused Trina and Soso of taking money from Big Dishman in return for sexual favors. She said she blamed all three of them, but Soso especially.

But she was a kid, I said.

"She knew what she was doing," Granny said.

I'd always thought of my grandmother as my protector, my savior. She was so put together and morally upright—I couldn't believe that she would have let her daughter be abused. Easier to not believe Trina, because she's a drug addict, because I've resented her for so long. It was hard for me to see that she'd been hurt too. But I could hear it, in the way Trina said Big Dishman's name, low and quiet, as if he still might be nearby.

NOT LONG AGO, Colby overdosed on heroin. "I just took a little line of it and next thing you know, I woke up and everybody was crying."

Aaron texted me: "I gave him narcan and cpr and he came back." He also sent a video of Colby on the floor: He was sweating, his eyes half closed, and he kept moving his mouth back and forth in this way that looked deeply familiar.

THIS PAST JUNE, I booked a trip to Kentucky. I had so many doubts about this essay. Was it a betrayal to speak so honestly about my family? Was I "pimping my trauma"? I wanted to talk with everyone in person.

My flight was early, but my son, sensing that I was leaving, woke up crying. He wrapped his arms around my neck and wouldn't let go. Whenever I tried to put him back in his crib, he screamed. My husband finally intervened, but I'd already held my son for so long that I missed my flight.

When I finally got to Lexington, Trina was drunk. I'd been telling her for weeks that I was coming to interview her for this story. But everything, as usual, was chaos. Tim, her boyfriend, had lost his phone, and a woman who lived at the Salvation Army had found it. Trina needed me to drive her over there to get it. The parking lot looked smaller than it had when we stayed there, the entrance somehow sleeker. I didn't go in.

Then Trina insisted that she had to clean her apartment before she could sit down and talk. Enough. I stormed off. When I'm in Kentucky, the old Jenisha slips out. I drove around, steaming. Granny's old office looked the same, but the Charlotte Court projects were gone, a new single-family home standing in the lot where Trina used to hang our clothes.

Finally I went back to Trina's. She insisted that she wasn't drunk, that she'd only had a Long Island. We sat on the side of her bed. I'd always wanted to ask why she chose drugs over us. Since her brain injury, it can be hard for her to recall things. But she answered my questions as best she could.

"It wasn't like I intentionally tried to do it," she told me. She said she would tell us that she was going around the corner to a friend's house—" 'I'll be right back. I'm going to get some sugar or something … Don't open the door for anybody.' " But then her friend would have crack, and people would be there partying. "I would say, 'Well, I'm just going to take one' … Then one turned into another one and another one and another one." She turned her head to the headboard and cried.

Later I went looking for Colby. He's still handsome—over 6 feet tall with a head full of hair. A decade ago he was in college, but now he doesn't have a job or a home. Back when we were little, I found a sheet of paper where he had written: "Dear Diary, I was born on May 10, and little did I know I was born a crack baby." I can still see his soft, left-handed cursive, wobbly on the page.

As we talked in my car, he described what it had felt like when he overdosed: "I didn't see no angels, no demons, no nothing."

"You think you died?" I asked.

"I was dead. I did die." His voice was so low, I worried the recorder wouldn't pick it up.

After our last interview, he wanted me to buy him a drink, but I said no. When I left him at the curb, sadness hit me like a glob of spit.

The last thing I did was go to my granny's. She lives just across the border in Indiana now, in a nice house with a four-car garage and a pond in the yard filled with goldfish. I wore a white lace dress and made sure my hair was straightened and concealer covered up my blemishes. She stared me up and down, saving her compliments for later.

She told me that she didn't want to be part of any story that included Trina or Aunt Soso. She gave me a glass of water and I patted her dog, and then it was time for my flight home. But just as I was about to leave, she said that I could call her later with my questions—we could do my "little interview."

I'd spent so much time pushing my family's history aside, and now here it was, circling back at me.

For two months, she dodged my calls. The whole time, I was worried about the story of the rape. Could I really write about something so painful? I love my granny, but we'd never talked honestly about the past. I had to remind myself that it wasn't a secret. It had been in the newspaper.

Then a researcher who was helping me on this story found something—files from a court case involving Big Dishman. At last, I thought, I'd have the legal record of Trina's accusation. I looked at the PDF of the crooked documents, the word DISMISSED stamped across a page.

But I was confused. The incident the complaint described was from 1988. One page was particularly blurry, but I could make out the words: "Dishman, William … did rub his granddaughter in the vaginal area while waiting [in] the car at Northpark Shopping Center."

The papers said the child involved was only 3 years old. Her initials were J.W.

I was 3 in 1988. My initials are J.W.

I called to ask Trina if she knew about this, and she said she'd had no idea. She seemed genuinely shocked, and insisted that she would never have let that happen to one of her kids. I called my granny next, and she said she didn't know anything about it either. She had trouble forming a response; I didn't know how to respond either.

She called me back later to say that "J.W. could've been any J.W."

She didn't understand why I wanted to dig all this up. "He's dead," she said. Yes, he's dead—and she was still trying to spare him. I was done with that.

That Sunday, I stayed in bed until late in the afternoon, trying to sleep it all off—my initials; 3 years old; granddaughter; DISMISSED. I'd spent so much time pushing my family's history aside, and now here it was, circling back at me.

Over the following days, I learned that there were other cases: The Fayette County court had records of four more criminal complaints against a William Dishman alleging sexual abuse of a minor. The first was from 1986, the last from 2002. The cases are sealed because they involve juveniles. I don't know who the alleged victims were—only that there were more.

I kept thinking of something Irvin said. "Secrets never stay secret, no matter what you do."

Two years ago, when I was pregnant with my son, I was angrier with Trina than I'd ever been. As I was becoming a mother myself, the weight of it hit me. I couldn't understand a mother not being there to protect her child. I still can't.

I've talked with my husband about my childhood, but he grew up in a stable household, and he can't really understand what it's like to come from a family like mine. We're both Black, but it's like we're in a mixed marriage.

Our life is comfortable, but *comfortable* feels like the wrong word. I still worry all the time about money, about losing the opportunities I've worked so hard to achieve. I still get flustered when trying to communicate my thoughts or ideas—still worry that I might never catch up. I've spent my whole life trying not to be like my mother. I've spent my whole life trying to belong, to show people that I'm not like "them," not a Black person living in poverty, not a Black person with an addiction.

My son is one and a half now. My husband and I take him to the zoo and try to read to him every night. Before he was born, he had more books than baby clothes. I don't want him to have to hustle like I did. I want to give him the words he needs to open any doors, and if I can't, I want him to know where to find those words: in books. He already likes to pull my books off the shelf. He wrinkles the pages, bites the corners, wets a bookmark with his drool—and I don't mind.

Charles Wright said he couldn't connect the fragments of his life. That's how I feel too. How can I connect the fragments when the ground is still heaving up new ones?

Many people told me not to write this. Trina was the one who said to do it. "The truth is the light of the world," she said. "The truth will set you free."

So this is the beginning of the story of Jenisha Watts. *A*

Jenisha Watts is a senior editor at The Atlantic.



Melody Barnes



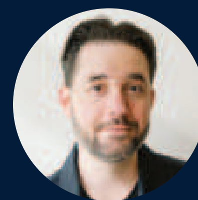
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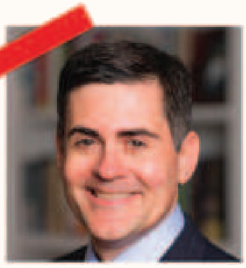
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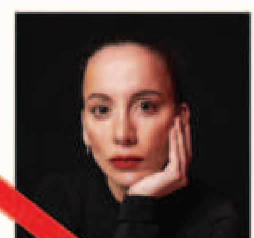
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THE PRIME MINISTER *and* THE MOONIES

THE BIZARRE STORY BEHIND THE ASSASSINATION OF SHINZO ABE

By
ROBERT F. WORTH


22
区議
切目

On the last morning of his life, Shinzo Abe arrived in the Japanese city of Nara, famous for its ancient pagodas and sacred deer. His destination was more prosaic: a broad urban intersection across from the city's main train station, where he would be giving a speech to endorse a lawmaker running for reelection to the National Diet, Japan's parliament. Abe had retired two years earlier, but because he was Japan's longest-serving prime minister, his name carried enormous weight. The date was July 8, 2022.

In photos taken from the crowd, Abe—instantly recognizable by his wavy, swept-back hair; charcoal eyebrows; and folksy grin—can be seen stepping onto a makeshift podium at about 11:30 a.m., one hand clutching a microphone. A claque of supporters surrounds him. No one in the photos seems to notice the youngish-looking man about 20 feet behind Abe, dressed in a gray polo shirt and cargo pants, a black strap across his shoulder. Unlike everyone else, the man is not clapping.

Abe started to speak. Moments later, his remarks were interrupted by two loud reports, followed by a burst of white smoke. He collapsed to the ground. His security guards ran toward the man in the gray polo shirt, who held a homemade gun—two 16-inch metal pipes strapped together with black duct tape. The man made no effort to flee. The guards tackled him, sending his gun skittering across the pavement. Abe, shot in the neck, would be dead within hours.

At a Nara police station, the suspect—a 41-year-old named Tetsuya Yamagami—admitted to the shooting barely 30 minutes after pulling the trigger. He then offered a motive that sounded too outlandish to be true: He saw Abe as an ally of the Unification Church, a group better known as the Moonies—the cult founded in the 1950s by the Korean evangelist Reverend Sun Myung Moon. Yamagami said his life had been ruined when his mother gave the church all of the family's money, leaving him and his siblings so poor that they often didn't have enough to eat. His brother had committed suicide, and he himself had tried to.

"My prime target was the Unification Church's top official, Hak Ja Han, not Abe," he told the police, according to an account published in January in a newspaper called *The Asahi Shimbun*. He could not get to Han—Moon's widow—so he shot Abe, who was "deeply connected" to the church, Yamagami said, just as Abe's grandfather, also a prime minister and renowned political figure in Japan, had been.

Investigators looked into Yamagami's wild-sounding claims and found, to their alarm, that they were true. After a quick huddle, the police appear to have decided that the Moonie connection was too sensitive to reveal, at least for the moment. It might even affect the outcome of the elections for the Upper House of the Diet, set to take place on July 10. At a press conference on the night of the assassination, a police official would say only that Yamagami had carried out the attack because he "harbored a grudge against a specific group and he assumed that Abe was linked to it." When reporters clamored for details, the official said nothing.

After the election, the Unification Church confirmed press reports that Yamagami's mother was a member, and the story quickly took off. The Moonies, it emerged, maintained a volunteer army of campaign workers who had long been a secret weapon not just for Abe but for many other politicians in his conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which remains in power under Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. Later that month, the Japanese tabloid *Nikkan Gendai* published a list of 111 members of parliament who had connections to the church. In early September 2022, the LDP announced that almost half of its 379 Diet members had admitted to some kind of contact with the Unification Church, whether that meant accepting campaign assistance or paying membership fees or attending church events. According to a survey by *The Asahi Shimbun*, 290 members of prefectural assemblies, as well as seven prefectural governors, also said they had church ties. The rising numbers exposed a scandal hiding in plain sight: A right-wing Korean cult had a near-umbilical connection to the political party that had governed Japan for most of the past 70 years.

The Japanese were outraged not just by the appearance of influence-peddling but by a galling hypocrisy. Abe was a fervent nationalist, eager to rebuild Japan's global standing and proudly unapologetic for its imperial past. Now he and his party had been caught in a secretive electoral alliance with a cult that—it soon emerged—had been accused of preying on Japanese war guilt to squeeze billions of dollars from credulous followers.

As information about Yamagami's personal history and the LDP's role became more widely known, a strange inversion took place: People began expressing sympathy for the alleged assassin and anger at the victim. A Japanese weekly devoted a cover story to the swooning fans known as "Yamagami Girls" and other supporters. Well-wishers began sending Yamagami gifts. Thousands of people protested the decision to grant Abe a state funeral, and a hastily made feature film that portrayed Yamagami as a tragic hero was shown all over the country. The LDP's poll numbers, already falling, continued to drop, and a cabinet minister was forced to resign after he failed to adequately explain his ties to the church.

The assassination exposed deep divisions over the legacy of Abe, who is hailed by some for restoring Japanese influence around the world and reviled by others as a dangerous throwback to the country's warlike past. The influence of the Moonies on Abe and the LDP remains a live issue, and last November the Kishida government—eager to clear its name—opened an inquiry that could threaten the Unification Church's legal status in Japan as a religion. That could prove a lethal blow, and might raise questions about the church's role in the other 100 or so countries where it has a presence, including the United States. Because the group's leaders have not been charged with any crime, the

Previous page: *Former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who was assassinated in July 2022.* **Inset:** *Unification Church founder Sun Myung Moon and his wife, Hak Ja Han Moon, in 1984.*

PREVIOUS PAGE: DPA / ALAMY; API / GAMMA-RAPHO / GETTY; MINOKUNIYA / GETTY; WIKIMEDIA

Japanese government would, in essence, be asserting the power to decide when a religion does more harm than good.

All of this might have remained hidden were it not for the desperate act of a man who had failed at just about everything else. As he awaits trial in the solitude of his prison cell, Tetsuya Yamagami can console himself that he may be among the most successful assassins in history. A year after Abe's death, his murder has come to seem less the random act of an unhinged loner than a tragedy unfolding slowly over decades.

IN THE DAYS AFTER Abe's assassination, many people were amazed to discover that the Moonies were still relevant at all. In Japan, as in the United States, the group had receded from the headlines since the 1980s and '90s, when it made news with its bizarre mass weddings, eerily totalitarian style, and often brazen bids for political influence—including Sun Myung Moon's founding of *The Washington Times*, a conservative newspaper in the U.S. capital.

Another surprise was Japan's central role in Moon's activities. Although the Unification Church is headquartered in South Korea, since the 1970s the bulk of the group's money has come from Japan, and so have many of its most fanatical followers. "Japan is actually designated as a core pillar" of the church's finances, I was told by Masaue Sakurai, a former high-ranking official in the church who was forced out in 2017. Of all the people I spoke with while reporting on the Moonies in Japan—about a dozen current and former members and their families, as well as lawyers, journalists, political figures, and activists—Sakurai was the only one who seemed to sympathize with both sides: those who loathe the church and those who revere it. He met me in a Tokyo coffee shop where Mozart and Schubert piano sonatas played softly in the background, and he stood to greet me in the Japanese manner, bowing and proffering his business card with both hands.

Sakurai was blunt about the church's ruthless methods in Japan, but he spoke warmly about its adherents, whom he sees as victims of a misguided leadership. (He grew up in the church.) He told me that when he began working for the church, in 1998, it was "already focusing 100 percent on the forced collection of donations." The group initially raised money from "spiritual sales." Japanese followers were pressured to buy and sell cheap Korean-made products at outrageous markups—miniature stone pagodas, personal *inkan* signature stamps, "special" ginseng tea—with the promise of healing powers. When that triggered lawsuits and public complaints, the church moved to direct donations.

"MY PRIME TARGET WAS THE UNIFICATION CHURCH'S TOP OFFICIAL, HAK JA HAN, NOT ABE," THE ALLEGED ASSASSIN TOLD THE POLICE. HE COULD NOT GET TO HER—SO HE SHOT ABE, WHO, HE SAID, WAS "DEEPLY CONNECTED" TO THE CHURCH.

Moon, who died in 2012, justified a predatory focus on Japan by proclaiming that South Korea is an "Adam nation" and Japan an "Eve nation." Like a traditional wife, Japan was obligated to fulfill the needs of her husband. Behind this blithely patriarchal formula was an old and festering grievance between the two countries. From 1910 until 1945, Japan ruled Korea as a colony and treated its people as an inferior race, an attitude that remains widespread in Japan to this day. During the Second World War, thousands of Korean women and girls were forced into sexual slavery by Japan as "comfort women."

This sordid history was never fully acknowledged or taught in Japan after the war, and the Moonies have exploited that willed ignorance to tremendous effect. They make a practice of showing new members photos of Japanese soldiers committing war crimes in Korea, says Pascal Zivi, a Frenchman who has lived in Japan for 43 years and runs a research center on religious extremism based in the city of Sapporo. "Young Japanese are shocked, and that makes them more likely to believe that other things have been hidden from them," he told me. The Moonies then tell their recruits that their ancestors are suffering in hell for their sins, and that the only way to save them is by giving money.

Few outsiders know as much about the Moonies as Hiroshi Yamaguchi, a grandfatherly lawyer of 74 who founded a legal consortium to help former church members recover their money. "What they do," he explained to me, "is dig up your concerns," probing for family troubles and emotional vulnerabilities. They then attribute those difficulties to sins committed by ancestors, sins that can be atoned for only by donating to the Unification Church. Meanwhile, the Moonies ferret out the details of a target's income and assets, and report it up the chain. All of these methods are laid out in manuals for the church's fundraisers, who answer to a military-style hierarchy. (Although I spoke with several individual members, the church did not respond to queries about its practices.)

Yamaguchi is a devout Buddhist who told me he got involved because he was revolted by the way the Moonies "abuse religion to make money or manipulate people." When Yamaguchi first heard that Abe had been shot, he was horrified. But when he discovered that the suspected killer was a victim of the church, his reaction was "No wonder."

He and his fellow lawyers have brought roughly 35,000 compensation claims against church followers and employees by former

members since 1987, and have recovered more than $206 million. Presumably that represents only a fraction of the church's donation revenue in Japan during those years. And Japan, where the church has an estimated 60,000 followers, was a rich resource for decades before the lawyers got involved. The church transferred at least $800 million from Japan to the United States from 1975 to 1984, according to two former church officials who spoke with *The Washington Post* in 1984. (The church never did gain a large American following, despite its visibility in the U.S. in the '80s.)

Behind the numbers is widespread human suffering of a kind that Yamagami helped reveal. His mother joined the Unification Church when he was a boy, after his father committed suicide and his brother was diagnosed with malignant lymphoma. She donated about 100 million yen to the church—roughly $700,000—forcing her to declare bankruptcy, and leaving the family destitute. Yamagami had to abandon his hopes of going to university. His brother killed himself. "It is no exaggeration to say that the experiences then have continued to distort my entire life," he wrote in a letter to a blogger the day before the assassination.

Yamagami may seem an extreme case. But Sakurai, the former church official, told me the family's account was familiar. Sakurai's job involved traveling all over Japan and counseling church families who had complaints or problems. He heard so many stories about suffering caused by excessive donations that he began speaking up about it to his superiors. His warning was not well received, he said, and when he persisted, he was asked to retire.

The Japanese public got an unusual real-time glimpse of the familial wounds suffered by church members in early October 2022, when a defector appeared at an emotional press conference in Tokyo. The defector was a 26-year-old woman who had grown up in the Unification Church, and still felt so threatened by it that she used a pseudonym, Sayuri Ogawa. Her face was partially covered by a surgical mask. Dressed in a gray suit and seated alongside her husband, she was earnest and concise, describing the church's abusive practices and offering proposals to curtail them. She spoke of the fear of hell that the church had instilled in her as a child, and of people pressured into marrying virtual strangers during group weddings, with many of the couples "now living a life of regret."

The most powerful moment came 47 minutes into the press conference, when a hand-delivered message arrived unexpectedly from the Unification Church. The message—read aloud in front of the cameras by Ogawa's husband—declared that Ogawa suffered from psychiatric issues, that she had a tendency to lie, and that the press conference must stop immediately. The message had been signed by her parents. Ogawa was visibly stunned and upset. But she went on to describe her struggles with dissociative and panic disorders, brought on by her parents' rigid adherence to church practices. Fighting back tears, she said she was now mentally healthy and had been free of the church for the past four years. Many in the audience were deeply moved to see the way Ogawa maintained her dignity in such a vulnerable moment. "If you truly believe in me," Ogawa said unsteadily before the conference ended, "please make sure that this organization is dissolved."

The church's leaders have tried to tamp down criticism once again by conceding that their fundraising has been too aggressive. In September 2022, a senior official said the church was putting new measures in place to prevent excessive donations.



Hiroshi Yamaguchi, the founder of a lawyers' network that has brought thousands of claims against Unification Church followers and employees

YOSHIO TSUNODA / AFLO / ALAMY

But when I spoke with current believers—all but one of them chosen by the church—I heard a much less penitent tone. Every one of them said that complaints about fundraising were exaggerated, and that money was given voluntarily. Two of them said they didn't believe that Yamagami's motive for the alleged murder had anything to do with his mother's donations. He is a "terrorist," one of them told me, and the whole affair was cooked up by leftists as a pretext to go after the church.

The Moonies I met in Japan surprised me with their friendliness and candor, but I got the impression that they live in a world apart from their fellow citizens. One of them was a 27-year-old woman named Kiaki Kojima, who belongs to what the church calls its "second generation"—the children of believers. We met in a Tokyo office building where tiny furnished rooms are rented by the hour for business meetings, each one numbered and code-locked in long corridors, like cells in an immaculate prison. Kojima told me her mother had donated 100 million yen to the church, the same amount as Yamagami's mother. Kojima had grown up in poverty as a result, eating frugally and wearing hand-me-downs, her university options limited. She said she had resented those privations at one brief moment in her childhood, but had then come to accept them.

She also accepted the church's choice of husband for her, a Filipino man whom she married online in 2021 without ever having met him. (They have met since then, but he has not yet moved to Japan.) She demonstrated how she had leaned forward to kiss her laptop screen during the wedding ceremony, sitting in a bridal dress in a church some 2,000 miles from the groom. At times, I thought I caught a hint of embarrassment in her eyes, as if she understood how odd these things sounded to an outsider. But she said she had grown up in the church and felt loved there.

IN RETROSPECT, Abe's relationship with the Unification Church looks exactly like the political land mine it turned out to be. Hiroshi Yamaguchi and his lawyers' group wrote repeatedly over the years to politicians in the LDP and other parties, urging them to cut ties with the Moonies. Abe himself may have recognized the risks. In 2003, a Japanese journalist named Yoshifu Arita, who had written about the Unification Church, appeared on a TV talk show alongside Abe, then a senior LDP lawmaker. Arita, who later served in parliament with a party opposed to the LDP, told me that during a commercial break he asked Abe if the Moonies had ever approached him. Abe said yes, they were very persistent about it, and he tried to avoid them.

Abe's ambitions appear to have changed his mind. He became prime minister for the first time in 2006, and then resigned a year later, brought down by financial scandals, election losses, and a painful case of ulcerative colitis that made it difficult for him to work. "Abe was traumatized by the failure of his first term," Koichi Nakano, a political-science professor at Sophia University, in Tokyo, told me. "When he came back, he was focused on never letting that happen again."

Abe did not get another chance to run until 2012. The opportunity came after what may have been a fateful meeting. In April of that year, Abe hiked up Mount Takao, a forested peak about an hour from downtown Tokyo where many visitors stop at a Buddhist temple to pray for good fortune from a long-nosed supernatural being known as a *daitengu*. Abe was accompanied by a senior church-allied figure named Masatoshi Abe (no relation). Along with them, Masatoshi said in an interview years later, was a contingent of some 300 young Moonies. Masatoshi and the younger Moonies urged Abe to run for prime minister.

It's impossible to know what difference this mountainside pep talk made to Abe, but it may have served as a reminder of the church's power to enlist eager volunteers. It may also have underscored their political common ground. Although the LDP has no religious orientation, its longtime emphasis on family values, anti-communism, and neoliberal economics meshed well with Moon's neobiblical conservatism. The party appears to have conveniently ignored Moon's other beliefs, including his claim to embody the "perfect Adam" who would redeem humanity through his own sinless family.

The moment was an important one for the Moonies too. By the early 2000s, the group had come under renewed suspicion, and not just because of the rising number of lawsuits filed by victims of its "spiritual sales." In early 1995, members of a doomsday cult called Aum Shinrikyo released sarin gas on the Tokyo Metro at rush hour, killing more than a dozen and injuring hundreds. The attack was a terrible shock for a country unused to violent crime, much less terrorism, and drew hostile attention to what are known in Japan as "new religious movements." (Aum had no links to the Moonies.) The Unification Church, Yamaguchi told me, became worried that it no longer had political protection. So church officials reached out to Abe. "Why Abe? Because Abe already knew he could use them for his political advantage. And his hawkish politics jibed with theirs."

For Shinzo Abe, the Unification Church was also a family inheritance. His grandfather Nobusuke Kishi had helped the Moonies become established in Japan when he was prime minister in the late 1950s, and in 1964 the church moved its Japanese headquarters to an Art Deco–style building in Tokyo's Shibuya ward that Kishi had used as his official residence when he was prime minister. His own home was next door. The relationship was rooted in their shared anti-communism. Kishi was a political survivor. He had risen to prominence in the 1930s, when he oversaw Japan's brutal occupation of Manchuria. He was jailed in 1945 as a Class A war-crimes suspect, but American authorities released him when they saw that right-wing anti-communists like Kishi could help steer Japan on a pro-Western course. Kishi brokered the founding of the LDP in 1955.

POLITICAL INFLUENCE had been Moon's guiding star almost from the start. Although he founded his church in the 1950s, it gained a broad following only after Lieutenant General Park Chung Hee staged a military coup in South Korea in 1961. The church was then "organized" by the founder and director of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, Brigadier General Kim Jong-pil, according to an American CIA report written two years later, though it is not clear exactly what role the Korean agency played. South Korea's leaders appear to have seen Moon as a useful instrument because of his fierce opposition to communism. But they were also anxious about the quasi-religious cult of personality being developed in the '60s and '70s by the North Korean dictator Kim Il Sung. It is possible that they saw Moon as a cultural counterweight of sorts, says Peter McGill, a British journalist with decades of experience in Japan and South Korea who has written about the Unification Church.

Moon used his state connections and his growing Japanese income to build a large portfolio of holdings. Tongil Heavy Industries, headed by one of Moon's cousins, manufactured artillery guns and other weapons for the South Korean military. Moon's family owned or controlled chemical and construction companies, resorts, Brazilian soccer teams, and real estate all over the world, including the New Yorker Hotel. Moon's most successful business venture may have been sushi, which he and his Japanese followers helped popularize in the United States. Eating raw tuna was still an exotic pursuit to Americans when Moon—the self-declared "king of the ocean"—began investing in shipyards in the late 1970s and sending his followers to sell door-to-door from refrigerated vans. True World Foods, a seafood company founded at Moon's direction, controls a large share of the sushi trade, selling raw fish to thousands of restaurants across the United States and Canada.

Kishi and Moon exchanged favors for decades, often under the aegis of church-sponsored groups such as the International Federation for Victory Over Communism, which helped Moon curry favor with right-leaning political figures around the world. After Moon was convicted of tax fraud in the United States and sent to federal prison, Kishi wrote a letter to President Ronald Reagan, urging him to release his old friend. (Reagan did not.) Kishi passed on his Moonie connections to another leading LDP member, his son-in-law, Shintaro Abe (Shinzo Abe's father), who would serve four years as Japan's foreign minister.

Revelations about the depth of the Abe dynasty's involvement with the Moonies have continued to trickle out over the

MASAUE SAKURAI, A FORMER HIGH-RANKING OFFICIAL IN THE CHURCH, WAS BLUNT ABOUT ITS RUTHLESS METHODS IN JAPAN. HE TOLD ME THAT WHEN HE BEGAN WORKING FOR THE CHURCH, IN 1998, IT WAS "ALREADY FOCUSING 100 PERCENT ON THE FORCED COLLECTION OF DONATIONS."

past year. In April, church records published online in South Korea showed that Moon considered himself a kingmaker and even a kind of savior in Japanese politics. "Anyone who wants to become prime minister in Japan needs my support," he was quoted as saying in 1987. He boasted about his relationships with three generations of the Abe family.

Shinzo Abe's involvement with the church appears to have been discreet at first. Leaked church memos direct members to support him, and suggest that the church saw Abe as a reliable conservative who agreed with its positions on gay marriage and traditional gender and family roles. Later on, Abe became less cautious. In September 2021, he delivered a prerecorded video address at an online church conference, praising Moon's widow, Hak Ja Han Moon, for her "tireless efforts in resolving disputes in the world, especially in relation to the peaceful reunification of the Korean peninsula." (Donald Trump delivered a speech at the same event.) Yamagami reportedly saw Abe's video at the 2021 conference, which may have helped him decide to target the former prime minister.

Why was the church such a valuable ally? I tried to ask LDP officials, but they would not speak with me. The Moonie connection remains politically toxic for Japanese politicians. The Moonies are less shy about the relationship.

"I was able to get candidates elected for the parliament, for gubernatorial elections, and city mayors," Mamoru Kamono, a dapper 67-year-old who spent decades as an in-house journalist and election organizer for the Unification Church, told me. Kamono met me at the church's Tokyo headquarters, on a high-rent downtown street just a few minutes from the crowds and digital billboards of Shibuya Crossing, the world's busiest pedestrian intersection. We were escorted into a spotless room overseen by a portrait of Sun Myung Moon. Kamono seemed proud of and eager to talk about the political work he'd done for LDP candidates in Toyama prefecture, northwest of the capital. The church's volunteers did more than just knock on doors and make phone calls, he told me. They worked their contacts with leading executives in hundreds of companies, and leveraged an informal system of group voting. After obtaining the names of all the employees in a given company, Kamono told me, the Moonie volunteers would press them to secure the votes of their family members and neighbors. In Japan's highly disciplined, hierarchical society, this strategy often resulted in big margins for the church's favored candidates.

After elections, logs of campaign phone calls would show that the Moonies did 10 times as much outreach as any other group, Kamono said, and this translated into immense gratitude from candidates. That made it all the more hurtful, he added, when the Toyama city council passed a resolution severing all ties to the church after Abe's assassination.

WHAT TANGIBLE GAIN did the Moonies get in return for their campaign miracles? They may not have needed much, because they had trust in the LDP's conservative views about gay marriage, women's rights, and the importance of family, core issues for the church. (Moon's own homophobia went far beyond the LDP's; he once described gay people as "dirty, dung-eating dogs.") But the Abe administration does appear to have gone out of its way to do them at least one big favor.



In 2015, the government took the controversial step of allowing the church to rename itself, to the outrage of its longtime critics. This was a matter of real import, because since the mid-'90s the words *Unification Church* had been tainted in Japan. The church now advertises itself under the more anodyne banner of Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, though most outsiders still use the old name.

Kihei Maekawa, who was a senior official in the education ministry when it approved the rebranding, is still stewing about it. (Religion falls within the ministry's portfolio.) When I arrived at his office, he handed me a printout of the 41-page Law on Religious Corporations. He told me the church's application to change its name was granted a quick approval by the education minister at the time—an ally of Abe's who had received his own election help from the Moonies and taken money from a church-linked publication. (The minister, Hakubun Shimomura, has denied that he was involved in the name change.) This wasn't just political opportunism, Maekawa said. It was also a repudiation of his ministry's prior decision. When the church had first approached the government about changing its name, in 1997, Maekawa was in charge of the relevant bureau. He and his colleagues reached a consensus that allowing the change would be "an extreme cover-up," because the church had become notorious for its fundraising practices.

In 1995, Reverend Moon and Hak Ja Han Moon presided over the mass wedding of 35,000 couples at Olympic Stadium in Seoul, South Korea.

There are hints that the government may have done other favors. Arita, the journalist and former parliamentarian, told me that he spoke with a group of senior police officials after the 1995 sarin-gas attack on the Tokyo Metro, when all new religious groups were under greater scrutiny. One of the officials told him that "next, we are aiming to expose the Unification Church." A decade later, Arita said, he met some retired police officials, and when he asked them why there had been no prosecution of the Unification Church, they replied, "Its political power." The police have declined to comment on the matter, and last year the church sued Arita and several others for defamation.

The LDP denies that it did anything for the Moonies and maintains that it simply accepted the help of campaign volunteers. But after Abe's assassination, the party's plummeting poll numbers created a political imperative for Prime Minister Kishida (who has denied any connection to the church) to prove that he and the rest of the LDP are not Moonie stooges. In November 2022, his culture minister announced a formal probe into the church's



YAMAGUCHI HARUYOSHI / SYGMA / GETTY; BETTMANN / GETTY; WIKIMEDIA

alleged misbehavior. This would help establish whether there are grounds to withdraw the church's tax benefits and status as a religious organization. Even if there are such grounds, a resolution could take years.

Is the Unification Church a religion at all? The church's representatives scoff at the question. They point out that the Moonies have been recognized in Japan since 1964, and that only two of the country's 180,000 registered religious groups have ever been dissolved. One was Aum Shinrikyo, and another was a Buddhist group whose priests were enriching themselves through fraud. In both cases, the group's leading figures were convicted of crimes—a standard that the Unification Church's main lawyer, Nobuya Fukumoto, told me ought to be the relevant legal precedent. There is no criminal case against the Unification Church's leaders in Japan, and therefore, in his view, no basis to withdraw the church's legal status. He said the current government inquiry is nothing more than a desperate effort by Kishida to shore up support.



Shinzo Abe's alleged assassin, Tetsuya Yamagami, used a homemade gun. After the shooting, he did not attempt to flee.

Others say the church should have been confronted long ago. Kihei Maekawa, the former government official, showed me a line in the Law on Religious Corporations declaring that the state is entitled to revoke a religion's status if, "in violation of laws and regulations, the religious corporation commits an act which is clearly found to harm public welfare substantially." Individual members of the Unification Church have been sued successfully; the unanswered question is whether the institution itself can be held liable. Maekawa noted that the Church of Scientology, which is not approved as a religion in Japan, approached his ministry during the 1990s about applying for official recognition. It was told not to waste its energy. If the Unification Church were applying today for the first time, the same thing would likely happen.

Some critics say the church has done so much damage that removing its nonprofit status is not enough. They want a law to help protect the public from the dangers of cults. Eito Suzuki, a journalist who has been writing about the Moonies for decades and who has helped reveal the extent of their relationship with the LDP, told me that a government report proposed a law of just this kind back in 1995—after the Aum Shinrikyo subway attack—with a provision for monitoring abuses by religious movements. The idea, Suzuki said, was shelved.

PERHAPS ALL RELIGIONS start off as cults. It's not hard to imagine Buddha or Christ showing up at a Japanese government ministry today, application in hand, and being sent packing. But there are reasons to regard the Unification Church as unusual. Its devotees systematically misrepresent themselves and their intentions. They use fear to police their ranks and maximize their profits in a way that is often more redolent of the Mafia than of a holy order.

This was brought home to me during a long talk I had with a woman who was lured into joining the Moonies in 1997 and spent two years as a member. She and her husband—who helped her get out—agreed to tell me their story but asked that their names not be used, because even today they fear retaliation. I will refer to them as Keiko and Jun.

We met in a restaurant in downtown Tokyo. Keiko, a small, pale woman of 68, told me it all started when she was befriended by a fellow member of the parent-teacher association at her son's school. The woman invited Keiko and several other mothers to a place called the video center, where they watched films and TV shows. The center didn't have any visible affiliation, but as they returned over the following months—they were housewives with time on their hands—they noticed that religion began to play a bigger role in the films they saw. Twice Keiko asked, "Is this a religion you're trying to convert me to?" Both times, her new friend said no; it was just about education. The women grew closer. After a year, Keiko arrived at the center one day and was surprised to be handed a copy of the Bible. "They sat us down and said, 'We'll tell you who the Messiah is,'" she recalled. "'It's Moon.'"

Keiko said she was taken aback, but also reluctant to abandon her new friends. She decided to continue, telling herself she'd quit

THE ASAHI SHIMBUN / GETTY; MINOKUNIYA / GETTY

if things got bad. She attended lectures on the principles of the Unification Church, and soon she was being sent into the street to sell socks and handkerchiefs to benefit charities. (She later discovered that the charities did not exist, and the profits went to the church.) She concealed all of this from her husband, at the urging of her Moonie supervisors. She began spending money on vases and other supposedly spiritual products, and traveled to the church's headquarters in South Korea for "expel the demon" ceremonies. As her attachment to the group grew stronger, she began hearing a new message: If you speak ill of the church, you could die. If you betray Reverend Moon, you and your ancestors will burn in hell forever.

Jun, a retiree with a quiet, steadfast manner, told me it didn't take him long to figure out what had happened to his wife. He was determined to act, but he knew that other deprogramming efforts with Moonies had backfired, in some cases in spectacular fashion, when believers were locked up by their families for months, even years, and sometimes returned to the church anyway after regaining their freedom. The Moonies I met talked about these failed interventions (some of them documented in court) as evidence of the hostility they often face in Japan.

Jun told me he spent 18 months coming up with a team and a strategy before confronting his wife. He wanted to approach her "with sense, with feelings," and not just castigate her. He organized a month-long decompression, living with her in a hotel where relatives and former church members visited and helped her gain a fuller perspective on what she'd been through. Eventually, Keiko told me, she realized that the church had reduced her to a state of infantile dependence. This, she told me, is at the root of its doctrine: "They tell you not to think on your own," because that was Eve's original sin.

ON APRIL 15, 2023, Prime Minister Kishida was about to give a campaign speech at a fishing port in the southern city of Wakayama when a man in the crowd tossed a homemade pipe bomb at him. The smoking projectile landed just a few yards from his feet. Kishida's aides quickly pulled him to safety, and local fishermen wrestled the assailant to the ground. Although no one was seriously hurt, the incident instantly reawakened memories of the Abe assassination.

Japanese politicians may never again approach a campaign crowd with the same ease Abe displayed when he arrived that July morning at Nara. His death may come to mark a moment of lost innocence, the way the assassination of John F. Kennedy does in the United States.

The broader legacy of the Abe assassination is still taking shape. One thing seems clear: The Unification Church is likely to suffer in Japan even if it doesn't lose its legal status. The Moonies I met described a litany of insults and abuses hurled at them over the past year. The church's current faithful may not be overly troubled ("the Messiah is always ostracized," they are told), but recruiting new followers will be a challenge.

Nor has what Moon called the "Perfect Family" fared well since his death. Its members have spent much of the past decade fighting in court over his assets and legacy, and his children have struggled to live up to their "sinless" billing. One son was accused by his wife of cocaine addiction and domestic abuse. (He denied both claims and has since died.) Another son leaped to his death from a balcony at a Nevada casino. A third son, Hyung Jin "Sean" Moon, founded a separate, gun-centered church in Pennsylvania known as Rod of Iron Ministries, where followers do target practice with AR-15s and bring guns to church to be blessed. Hyung Jin wears a golden crown made of rifle shells, and delivers hate-filled sermons against the Democratic Party. He also expects to become the king of America. He reviles his mother—who runs the international church in South Korea—as the "whore of Babylon."

Although Abe's reputation has been stained, it may recover somewhat. His harshest critics tend to be older Japanese who have strong memories of the war and its aftermath, and who fear the revival of their country's military power. As that generation dies off, Abe may come to seem prescient, because of the way he prepared his country for the threats of a new century in which Japan must defend itself from an assertive China.

Counterintuitively, the reputation of Yamagami, his alleged assassin, may not suffer. There is an old tradition in Japan of reverence for the doomed hero, the man who undertakes a suicidal quest and becomes a figure of deep nobility, regardless of the justice of his cause. Many Japanese still revere the right-wing nationalists who stormed Tokyo's government buildings in 1936 and killed not one but two former prime ministers. The plot's ringleaders were later tried and executed, but a shrine to their memory stands in a prominent place in central Tokyo. The great Japanese author Yukio Mishima memorialized them in a story and a film. Their sincerity and patriotism are what matter to their admirers, not the cruelty of their act or its ramifications.

Something similar could be said of Yamagami. "I no longer have room to think about the political meaning and consequences of Abe's death," he wrote a day before the assassination. The purity of his motives—his righteous anger at the Unification Church—seems to have resonated with the Japanese public.

Yamagami's trial will offer Japan a chance to relive the entire drama. No date has been set as of this writing. Japanese prosecutors take their time, and for a man who has admitted to killing a former head of state, there may be pressure to apply the death penalty. If so, Yamagami will face an excruciating fate. Death-row prisoners in Japan are not told the date of their execution in advance. They wake up every morning not knowing if this day will be their last.

In the months before he fired the fatal shots, Yamagami described himself as a tragic figure, drawn inexorably to a confrontation that would destroy him. And he did not miss the ironic parallel between his own heedless fury and the zealotry of the church members who had ruined his life. His desperation for a murder weapon, he wrote, was "like a member of the Unification Church throwing his life away for a false savior." *A*

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The Joy and the Funk



The critic dream hampton thinks hip-hop is broken. But she can't stop trying to fix it.

By Spencer Kornhaber

Photograph by Erik Paul Howard

and the Mire



One sunny day in 1995, the Notorious B.I.G. sat in the passenger seat of a black Mercedes-Benz,

smoking joints and talking shit. Of course, Biggie did these things on many days during his short lifetime, but on this particular day, a neighborhood friend named dream hampton was in the back seat with a video camera. Wearing Versace sunglasses and a checked purple shirt, the 23-year-old rapper—whose breakout album, *Ready to Die*, had come out the year before—held a chunky cellphone to his ear. He was making plans and talking about girls, riffing in his lisped woof of a voice. He laughed and brought a square of rolling paper, full of pot leaves, to his lips.

From behind the camera, hampton asked whether he intended to consume their entire bag of weed. Annoyed at the interruption, Biggie mocked her question. Hampton's voice turned sharp. "Why are you going at me today?" she asked. "What's the problem? Do we need to do something before we go on the road? Take this outside?" The video cut to static.

I watched the footage this past June in the basement of hampton's house on Martha's Vineyard. Hampton herself was upstairs. She'd said it would be weird to view her younger self with me; I was surprised that she was willing to show me the footage at all. Hampton is arguably the most significant music journalist of her generation. She started out writing for the hip-hop magazine *The Source* in the 1990s before becoming a contributor to *Vibe* and *The Village Voice*. As hip-hop ascended to global dominance, hampton—whose lowercase byline is inspired by the Black feminist critic bell hooks—challenged it from the inside, treating rap music with the seriousness it deserved while calling out its materialism and misogyny. She co-wrote Jay-Z's landmark 2010 memoir; she produced the 2019 documentary that is widely credited with landing R. Kelly, the R&B star who contributed many horny refrains to rap songs, in prison after decades of unpunished sexual predation.

Yet I'd arrived two days earlier thinking that the many artists who'd crossed her path would be mostly off-limits for discussion. She has publicly, repeatedly, broken up with hip-hop. She is now primarily a filmmaker and an activist. A profile of her focused on hip-hop, she'd texted me, would be her "nightmare"—a stance that had softened only slightly by the time we met.

Her reluctance is partly a reflection of the life she leads in her early 50s. Although she was born in Detroit, and made her name in New York City, she now spends much of the year on Martha's Vineyard. When she first visited friends there, shortly after the birth of her daughter, in 1996, she experienced a new kind of calm: "I didn't even know what it felt like for a place to bring you peace," she told me. Now wild turkeys wander past the rhododendrons in her yard. Her home thrums with indie rock and NPR news, not Kendrick Lamar or Ice Spice. Though hip-hop celebrated its 50th birthday this year—commemorating a legendary August 1973 party in the Bronx—she realizes that the genre isn't exactly courting middle-aged moms. "Even if I could get down on some kneepads and do 'WAP,' which I can't, it's not for me," she said, referring to the raunchy choreography associated with Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion's 2020 hit.

But her turn away from hip-hop is also rooted in pain and frustration. She and Biggie were so close that she asked him to be her daughter's godfather; he gave his daughter the middle name Dream. She brought him to her film classes at NYU; he gave feedback on her writing. Hampton also hassled Biggie about the sexism of his lyrics while he, out of her view, abused his girlfriend and protégé Lil' Kim. Maybe he would have evolved; maybe he wouldn't have—hampton will never know. A drive-by shooter killed him when he was 24, likely because of a rap beef. "I watched someone get killed who would still be alive if it wasn't for hip-hop," hampton told me.

As she looks out on today's hip-hop landscape, hampton still sees plenty of the violent machismo that shaped and endangered her friend—and that she has protested in various ways since she was 19. Hip-hop, in her view, has turned out to be a tool of the same unequal, exploitative system it once defied. In the beginning, she felt that the music had a certain joy and uplift, even as it was "grounded in the funk and the mire" of the country where it was born. Rap seemed to be "reaching for something," hampton told me, but "maybe the sin was that it was reaching to be a part of America."

Gradually, over decades, she has focused on other ways of trying to make change: advocacy and film work, which she has always believed were truer callings for her than writing. She's been a liaison between political causes and popular culture, helping John Legend, for instance, launch a campaign against mass incarceration in

"I was ashamed of being poor," hampton said. "And hip-hop made me not ashamed."



Along with John Legend, hampton (in sunglasses behind him) visits a prison in 2015 while working as a consultant on Legend's campaign against mass incarceration.

COURTESY OF DREAM HAMPTON

2015. She has also directed, written, or produced activist-minded entertainment, such as *Finding Justice*, a 2019 BET documentary series about Black grassroots organizing, and *Freshwater*, a 2022 visual memoir about flooding in Detroit. These efforts have shaped law, litigation, and the thinking of everyday people.

Lately, however, hip-hop has drawn her back in. The genre's 50th-birthday celebrations—a 12-minute Grammys medley, commemorative sneaker lines, a press conference at which New York City Mayor Eric Adams, an ex-cop, quoted Public Enemy's "Fight the Power"—have put a gauzy sheen on a difficult history, and hampton feels obligated to offer a more complicated view. To that end, she reluctantly helped produce and direct a new Netflix docuseries about female rappers. And she has been revisiting her archives, including the Biggie footage I saw, with thoughts of how to correct unduly rosy public narratives about the dominant musical form of our time. Once again, she can't help but talk back.

HAMPTON'S FIRST EDITORIAL was so controversial that she says Spike Lee offered to lend her some bodyguards. It ran in 1991 in *The Source*, where hampton had been hired as a photo editor, and called out the rapper Dr. Dre for assaulting the 22-year-old TV personality Dee Barnes. Hampton described an emerging pattern of misogyny in the lyrics and behavior of hip-hop's young male stars. In our present era of morally charged cultural criticism, the essay seems—as the Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah (a former assistant of hampton's) put it to me—like a "letter from the future."

Hampton brought up the article on the first night we met, to mock it. We were standing in her kitchen. Hampton was searing salmon in a cast-iron skillet; a bag of superfood powder slumped on the countertop. The house is bright and airy, with white walls and sculptural furniture. Sitting on her mantel was a Kehinde Wiley bust of a Black boy posed like Louis XVI. One bookshelf featured an "ancestor altar" with black-and-white photos of lost loved ones, including Biggie. Though she lives alone, she has a 10-foot-long dining table both here and in the apartment she keeps in Detroit, for hosting.

Hampton called her Dr. Dre editorial "shrill" and "sanctimonious." I recited its last line, an assertion that the abuse of Black women "has no place in revolutionary music." Hampton laughed at her own naivete. "It's so funny!"

Her youthful belief that hip-hop could upend society, she explained, was born from growing up on the east side of Detroit as the daughter of a mechanic father and a waitress mother. While the crack epidemic turned many of her neighbors into dealers or users, she stayed inside reading bell hooks—captivated by the way hooks fused politics and culture in her criticism, and the way she centered Black women, whose perspective had for so long been sidelined. Hampton's teen years were spent taking a bus to a magnet high school full of rich kids who threw house parties straight out of a John Hughes movie. The classism of the Reagan era was in the air, but so was a stark counterpoint, the economic deprivation of Black and brown people in American cities. "I was ashamed of being poor," hampton said. "And hip-hop made me not ashamed."

Rap introduced rebellious ideas to hampton's own life. KRS-One's "Beef," an anti-animal-cruelty manifesto, turned hampton into a vegetarian. A Public Enemy lyric taught her about Assata Shakur, the Black Liberation Army activist living as



hampton on the roof of The Source*'s offices in New York, 1991*



Method Man and hampton on the Staten Island Ferry, 1994

a fugitive in Cuba after being convicted of killing a police officer. After hampton moved to New York to study film at NYU, she co-founded a chapter of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, an activist organization inspired by Black radical figures such as Shakur. Hampton began enlisting rappers to play benefit gigs.

Journalism gave hampton a broader platform. *The Source* sought to document rap with the energy and ambition that *Rolling Stone* had brought to rock. Informed by the cool wit of Joan Didion and the cadences of rap itself, hampton filled her articles with color and incident, slang and exegesis. In one 1993 feature, she wrote that the rapper Lil Malik, suspicious of what she was scribbling in her notes, threatened to shoot her: "Gimme the gat, I'ma smoke this bitch." Hampton was unfazed. "I'm not sure if this is the beginning of some new rhyme or if this little boy is trying to get a spanking," she wrote.

In the male-dominated realm of hip-hop, female rap journalists had to contend with this kind of treatment from their subjects. Hampton came up among a group of "hip-hop feminists," to use the culture writer Joan Morgan's term—women who championed the genre while still sharply criticizing it. Even in that fearless cohort, hampton's voice stood out for its boldness, recalls Kierna Mayo, a former editor in chief of *Ebony* and a longtime friend of hampton's who also worked with her at *The Source*. "Dream had a certain kind of self-possession that was not easy to miss," Mayo told me. "I remember being like, *Damn, this girl is not playing games*."

Then there was her inimitable style. "Every story she wrote left an impression," Questlove, the drummer for the Roots, told me. As a young musician, he thrilled to hampton's work for its cinematic portrayal of a world he hoped to join—"I'm talking '70s-Scorsese levels of description." When a hampton column in *Spin* described Treach from Naughty by Nature as "one of about three people on the whole planet who gives real hugs," Questlove made a promise to himself: One day, he'd become important enough to hug dream hampton.

Hampton really did get that close to hip-hop's major players. She rode Jet Skis at Puffy's house; Queen Latifah briefly hired her to work at her record label. (Hampton's daughter, Nina, who is now in her late 20s, told me, "The only person I've ever seen her be starstruck about was the Property Brothers.") A few blocks away from where hampton smoked with Biggie, the members of Digable Planets were recording jazz-inflected anthems about Black pride; hampton dated a rapper in that band, Ishmael Butler. He told me he found her "glamorous in a way, and a little aloof," yet he was mesmerized by her patter of literary observations, political theory, and wisecracks. "She would say things to you about yourself that nobody else would. But it was always true." He could feel their conversations seeping into his work. "She was already understanding what hip-hop was in a way that even people participating in it weren't, in terms of social, economic, and historical context," Butler said.

Being so enmeshed in the culture might have sanded down another writer's edge, but hampton's intimacy with the scene she wrote about lent her a particular authority. She came off as concerned but not condescending, always alive to artists' intentions and environment. When commentators began to pit so-called street rappers such as Biggie against so-called conscious ones such as Digable, hampton took to *The Village Voice* to point out that both acts hailed from the "same hood" and voiced the same struggles. The artists' contrasting sounds, hard and smooth, were equally valid forms of Black self-expression; both artists were responding, in their way, to life in a racist society. As hampton put it in her review, "If they differ, it's hardly on theory."

By the mid-'90s, national politicians were regularly inveighing against rap's indecency, but hampton was developing a more

NOTORIOUS B.I.G. PHOTO: ERNIE PANICCIOLI. OTHERS: COURTESY OF DREAM HAMPTON.



The Notorious B.I.G. and hampton, 1995



Questlove and hampton in Rome, 2001

nuanced, and bleaker, complaint. A 1996 double review of now-classic Nas and Jay-Z albums (*It Was Written* and *Reasonable Doubt*, respectively) offered a sweeping sermon on the state of hip-hop. Aesthetically, the music was at its "absolute best and most sophisticated," but philosophically, it was stuck on "hyper-capitalism, numbness, cartoonish misogyny." These were, in her analysis, generational pathologies, instilled by the crack era. Drugs hadn't just brought death and incarceration to poor urban areas—they had created new classes of haves and have-nots. "My fellow tenth graders left for summer break aspiring breakdancers and returned that fall as ballers—dripping in gold," hampton wrote. She yearned for music "about land and liberation rather than suitcases full of Benjamins and ice," but she saw hip-hop as merely repackaging American greed and individualism.

Jay-Z, then a 26-year-old who'd started dealing drugs at age 13, had rarely been written about with such rigor. He called up hampton to chat, sparking a friendship that continues today. In 1998, hampton wrote a masterful *Vibe* cover story probing Jay-Z's "murderous, enterprising" persona. It culminated with her asking if he was haunted by "the little boys who just wanted to be him" and who ended up dead or imprisoned. Jay-Z acknowledged some guilt but said, "I shake it off, you know?" Hampton wrote, "Well no, I don't."

Rap's body count was, by that point, a personal source of anguish. Hampton had spent six months profiling Tupac Shakur, the West Coast firebrand who'd been raised around the same Black radicals hampton admired, and they'd become good friends. He used to tease hampton for her unruly hair: "How you get pregnant?" he'd joke. When he was killed in a still-unsolved 1996 shooting, hampton felt a selfish anger: He'd never get to meet her newborn daughter. Six months later, Biggie was murdered in what many believe was a mistaken attempt at revenge for Tupac's death—a sickening end to a relationship that began with hampton introducing the two men on a music-video set in the early '90s.

Her *Village Voice* obituaries for both rappers seethed with frustration. The Biggie essay was an intimate account of grief: "I visit Big's mother at his condo in Teaneck and she cries a lot. Her whole chest caves in and she can't breathe." Hampton's Tupac obit was more of an elegy for an idea. She lamented that Tupac didn't "get his shit together and articulate nationalism for our generation." She also wrote a vow that she would break and renew for years to come: "I want to say that for me hiphop is dead."

ONE MORNING, hampton took me on a driving tour of the curving, forested roads of the Vineyard, past shingled cottages and rocky bluffs, pointing out the island's various neighborhoods. (Over there, she said, "people wear lobsters on their pants, and they're serious about it.") She told me that she'd had an epiphany after we'd talked the night before. She'd been up late, thinking about Tupac, and suddenly she was thinking about her own brother, and the cowardice of men.

Tupac was on trial for sexual assault when hampton profiled him in 1994. A female fan said that the rapper and his friends had raped her in a New York hotel room; Tupac said that he'd been sleeping in another room while other men attacked her. Eventually Tupac would be convicted of groping the woman but not of raping her. At the time, hampton's speculation was that Tupac hadn't assaulted the accuser, but that he had been awake while the other men did, and he hadn't intervened. When hampton accused Tupac of this over lunch, she said, he went on a sexist tirade, causing the two of them to get kicked out of the restaurant.

What she'd realized the night before our Vineyard drive is that the story of Tupac in that hotel room echoes one of her most difficult memories of her own brother. Hampton's brother,

who is one year younger than she is, recurs in her writing as an example of men absorbing hip-hop's messages. Hampton's 1991 review of N.W.A.'s second album of brutal gangsta rap—"When will this caveboy shit end?" she asked—closed with the image of him, "right hand on his nuts," cranking the volume. In 2012, he appeared in a personal essay she wrote about the time a group of neighborhood bullies tried to rape her when she was in eighth grade. He had let the boys into their house and, she wrote, stayed downstairs as she fought them off.

Hampton hasn't spoken to her brother in decades. But I called him, and he picked up on the first ring. "I feel bad for what happened," he said, of the night hampton was attacked. He disagreed with some details of her account, saying that he entered the room a few minutes after the violence began, at which point the boys stopped. On the whole, he expressed a mix of sadness and resentment about his relationship with his sister. He's proud of her, he said, and has followed her career from afar. But he thinks she believes that "men are the villain."

When I told hampton that I'd talked with her brother, she replied: "Oh good. He's alive then." She didn't want to relitigate the night of the assault. "I remember doing my own fighting," she said. But she had a strong response to the accusation that she vilifies men. "That's a Twitter-troll comment" about feminists, she said. "It's so reductive and it's so old."

She told me that she doesn't see her brother, who was a young adolescent then, as a "villain" for not fighting for her that night. In fact, she said, she tries to have sympathy for him, and for Tupac. The male tendency to band together at the expense of women has been inculcated over generations, long before rap. "I always say, I didn't learn about 'bitches and hos' from hip-hop," she said. "I learned it from the Bible." But she believes, as bell hooks argued, that little political progress for Black people, much less a revolution, can be accomplished without addressing sexism. Misogyny, hampton told me, is a gateway to other forms of intolerance. "If it's possible for you to hate people in your own community," she said, "then it's possible for you to be corrupted in all these other ways."

> **Although R. Kelly is finally in prison, hampton doesn't see much evidence that Black women are now any more likely to be believed when they speak out about abuse.**

Although she has never really stopped trying to get men to rethink their programming, the effort can feel maddening. In 2012, the rapper Too $hort made a video counseling young boys to put their hands down girls' underwear. In a dialogue published by *Ebony*, hampton explained to him why this was a disgusting thing to do. Too $hort said he hadn't known, until that controversy, what sexual assault really was. Coming from a then-45-year-old rap legend, this was a rather dispiriting sign of progress.

So when hampton was approached to direct a documentary about R. Kelly's sex crimes in 2018, she had little reason to believe that the project would change anything. Kelly's interest in underage girls had been infamous ever since he illegally married the 15-year-old singer Aaliyah in 1994. In 2008, he was acquitted in a trial over child-pornography charges involving a video that appeared to show him urinating on a 14-year-old girl. In 2017, the journalist Jim DeRogatis reported that Kelly had led a "cult" of women whom, through abuse and emotional manipulation, he kept in virtual captivity. DeRogatis's article was widely circulated, and yet Kelly denied the allegations and remained a major-label ticket seller.

Hampton agreed to make *Surviving R. Kelly* as a kind of penance. She had profiled Kelly in 2000, but she'd failed to look behind the closed doors of his studio. As she later wrote in *The Hollywood Reporter*, "I'd been in Jeffrey Dahmer's kitchen and not opened the fridge." So she set about the grueling work of getting victims to tell their stories on camera, despite Kelly's threats to blackmail those who spoke out. The singer's manager called in a threat to the theatrical premiere, warning that someone there had a gun and would start shooting. The event was canceled. But an average of 2.1 million people still tuned in as the six-part series aired on Lifetime in early 2019. Kelly's behavior had been widely treated as a punch line in the past, but now public sentiment turned toward horror and fury. One woman who watched the documentary was Kim Foxx, a Chicago-area prosector who issued a call for victims to contact her. Litigation around the country soon followed. In New York, charges were filed for sex trafficking and racketeering, and Kelly received a 30-year prison sentence in June 2022.

The documentary, which arrived amid the #MeToo movement, is now invoked as evidence of what a well-formed provocation, timed to its moment, can achieve. W. Kamau Bell, who was inspired by hampton to film his own docuseries about the crimes of Bill Cosby, noted that *Surviving* uses long takes and in-depth interviews to depict its subjects as "fully functioning human beings, and not people who were defined by their experience with R. Kelly." Hampton's filmmaking transcended voyeurism by conveying an urgent message: "There's an active crime taking place right now, and I need your help to stop it," as Bell put it. Her uncompromising sensibility had, it seemed, made a difference.

Hampton, however, is focused squarely on what the documentary has *not* accomplished. Her speech, normally fluid and lively, stiffened whenever Kelly's name came up in our conversations.

"*Surviving* gets held up as something that had impact, right?" she said. "What they mean is that there were consequences for R. Kelly. But I would argue this: If R. Kelly had apologized, if he had owned the harm that he caused, if he had made a real attempt at restitution, then … it would have impacted the culture." Instead, he sobbed and screamed denials at Gayle King in a March 2019 TV interview.

Hampton thinks that America's legal system, so focused on punishment, discourages honest reckonings in cases of abuse. Kelly's victims have been left to process what happened to them while fending off harassment by the singer's supporters, who hampton says remain active enough that she retains a security manager. And although Kelly is finally in prison, she doesn't see much evidence that Black women are now any more likely to be believed when they speak out about abuse.

When talking about R. Kelly, hampton brought up a seemingly unrelated incident: the shooting of Megan Thee Stallion by another rapper, Tory Lanez, in 2020. An abundance of evidence indicated that Lanez had fired a gun at Megan's feet during an argument, and he was convicted of assault in December. (He's since been sentenced to 10 years for the shooting.) But up until that conviction, much of the hip-hop world had coalesced around a narrative that portrayed Megan as a jilted lover of Lanez's who had fabricated his attack on her. She wept on TV about the pain she'd experienced; Drake made a song that seemed to call her a liar. To hampton, the way that men had circled up to discredit a Black woman felt like a repudiation of everything her work represented. "You do something like *Surviving* or you have a moment like #MeToo, and it's incredibly Sisyphean," she said. "The blowback is immediate and louder than any progress that was made. So it can have you retreat to your garden."

HAMPTON'S DISMAY is not limited to hip-hop and the patriarchy. When we spoke, she also worried about climate change, Gen Z's mental health, and the popularity of the TV series *Yellowstone*. But she has a certain exuberance, too, and even her darkest riffs are interspersed with jokes and recommendations. Listening to her talk, you get the feeling that great catharsis and truth are always just around the bend, after one more digression about poverty or shark attacks.

A little gloom can be useful in the idealistic world of left-wing activism. Hampton's longtime friend Monifa Bandele—formerly



dream hampton, August 2023

ERIK PAUL HOWARD FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

a head of Time's Up, the organization that fights workplace sexual harassment—said that hampton's pessimism has had an unusually constructive bent. She recalled that hampton would bemoan the futility of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement's mission to free incarcerated Black activists, and then whip up a ferociously effective publicity campaign for the group. "She sees things for what they really are," Bandele said. "So that includes the cracks, the deficits."

But her candor can also alienate people who would otherwise be on her side. In both social and professional settings, "I have had to tell her to bring it down a thousand," Bandele told me. Mayo, hampton's friend and former colleague, told me that she's long admired that hampton was "born free—just came here without the rules, without the propensity to even understand the rules." Yet because of that wild honesty, people have at times "questioned whether she was kind—sometimes unfairly, sometimes fairly," Mayo said. "She is not absolved of her accountability to friends and relationships any more than any of us are."

A few clashes have been public. In 2012, she caused a media vortex by tweeting that an album of protest music by Nas, one of the most vaunted lyricists of all time, had been largely written by the rappers Stic.man and Jay Electronica. She told me she just wanted to deflate hype around songs that aren't as deep, politically, as they pretend to be. But in a genre where the myth of the lone genius reigns supreme, accusations of ghostwriting are explosive. The songwriting credits for the album included the artists she had named, but all three men publicly denied hampton's claims, and rap fans tweeted that she was a "bitch" and a disgruntled "groupie." Even though the backlash was clearly laced with sexism, friends wondered why she'd needed to poke this particular bear. Stic.man had been a close friend, she'd been an early booster of Jay Electronica's music, and she'd first met Nas in the '90s. None of them has talked to her since.

Surviving R. Kelly also tested her friendships. After the film premiered, she spoke openly about the fact that a number of celebrities, including Questlove and Jay-Z, had declined to be interviewed (the latter recorded two full albums with Kelly in the early 2000s). Some on social media accused these artists of tacitly supporting abuse. Jay-Z privately expressed bafflement that she'd thrown him into the controversy. Questlove tweeted that he'd decided against appearing in the documentary only because he'd been asked to attest to R. Kelly's musical talent, a claim hampton denied. She told me she refused to apologize for truthfully responding to questions from reporters about the public figures who had turned down interviews. Even now, she believes that Jay-Z could have used his position of power to hold Kelly accountable: "I feel like what I did in six hours, he could have done in a 15-second verse," she told me. Questlove, who'd sought out her friendship so long ago, still feels shaken by the episode. "The cooling-down of a really great relationship—I mourn that," he told me.

Hampton tends to invoke being a perfectionist Virgo when discussing her propensity for confrontation. She's trying to change: Moving from writing to filmmaking—a medium that requires intense collaboration—has, she said, shown her the need to communicate more gently. Yet she also had a cutting take on people who can't handle harsh feedback. "There is an ego in having everything filtered through the lens of you and your feelings," she said.

Butler, the Digable Planets rapper, pushed back on the suggestion that she looks for conflict. "I would not say she challenges; I would say that she loves," he told me. "Because if she don't love you, she'll watch you do whatever you do and just be like, 'Oh well.'"

HAMPTON WANTED TO SAY "Oh well" when asked to help produce and direct the new Netflix docuseries *Ladies First: A Story of Women in Hip-Hop*. She'd prefer to spend time on her own creative ambitions—a TV comedy about white militias, an adaptation of writing by the South African author Bessie Head, a documentary dissecting the politics of police procedurals. But the production firm Culture House pitched her repeatedly, even after she declined. What finally pulled her in was her need to critique.

For decades, the list of household-name female rappers remained vanishingly small. But in the past few years, women have, by some measures, become the driving force in mainstream rap. This development, arriving around the 50th birthday of hip-hop, might seem like an occasion to celebrate. But hampton felt that the "Black-joy mafia" needed a reality check.

"They were telling a kind of triumphant story about representation," she said of the team at Culture House. "And I'm saying, 'In so many ways, the story of women in hip-hop is more *Game of Thrones* than it is *Sex and the City*.'" The horror stories are numerous: An unfair record deal left TLC penniless at the height of the group's success; early innovators such as Sha-Rock feel they've been driven out of the industry. As for today's boom in female rappers, "most of these women are putting the *p* in *patriarchy*." Cardi B, who has channeled marriage and motherhood into famously racy lyrics, is "incredibly conventional," hampton said. "She's like, 'I'm a ho for my husband.'"

Over the years, hampton has adjusted to the idea that not all progress needs to be a full-on revolution.



The hip-hop artist Bahamadia during the filming of Ladies First

COURTESY OF DREAM HAMPTON

Cardi B is an Afro-Latina ex-stripper and vocal Bernie Sanders supporter with a string of No. 1 hits—she has quite plainly broken a few boundaries. In her unapologetic vulgarity, she is also part of a wave of artists arguably doing for the female libido what decades of music—not just hip-hop—have done for male lust. But hampton is asking that we not overrate symbolic victories; that we not let flashy displays of female empowerment distract from the very real problems women face.

Carri Twigg, one of the executive producers of the series, gave a wry smile when I relayed that hampton had described herself as a "pain in the butt" on the project. Twigg had sought hampton's expertise precisely to give *Ladies First* some bite. "It's really easy to tell a glitzy, happy version of hip-hop: *Hey, look at all these women; they made all this money*," she said. "Dream was always the first person to be like, 'And at what cost?' Every single pass, dream was the first person to be able to spot compromise, inauthenticity."

The resulting series doesn't shy away from showing tragedy and exploitation, and it smartly highlights a variety of sexist double standards. But it also flaunts the sounds and fashions of artists such as Nicki Minaj, Doja Cat, and, yes, Cardi B to show how hip-hop really has opened up to female performers. Hampton admitted that even she was moved by some of the more celebratory material. Over the years, she has adjusted to the idea that not all progress needs to be a full-on revolution. "The creativity that we fight with is, like, life itself," she said. "For me, hip-hop was one of those creative tools with which we fought. We weren't always fighting systemic oppression. Sometimes we were just fighting respectability politics. And we didn't even call it that, but we just knew that we wanted to wear shorts that cut our ass."

The series also devotes a few moments to hampton herself. The now-middle-aged Dee Barnes, the TV host whom Dr. Dre attacked 32 years ago (an incident for which he offered only a vague apology, to "the women I've hurt," in 2015), expresses tearful gratitude that hampton defended her in *The Source*. Photos of hampton and snippets of her articles flash on the screen. Joan Morgan speaks of the importance of female rap journalists: "We love hip-hop enough to hold it accountable."

IN WHAT WERE supposed to be my final hours on Martha's Vineyard, wildfire smoke blanketed New York City, grounding my flight home, so I had time to sit on hampton's back porch. Nina, her daughter, and a houseguest, the architect V. Mitch McEwen, were there for lunch. Nina shared a story about taking a nap at the house of some family friends: Jay-Z and Beyoncé. McEwen described hampton's Detroit home as a kind of salon for the city's promising minds. "You would hear about these young real-estate developers, or these amazing artists, or these queer activists, and then you'd go to dream's dinner, and they'd all be sitting around the table," she said.

Hampton came out with plates of shrimp and grits and explained why, after two days of telling me she was over hip-hop, she was now comfortable having me see the footage of Biggie that she hadn't watched in years. She soon hopes to say a final farewell to the genre by editing her tape archives—including '90s-era video of Snoop Dogg, Method Man, and Q-Tip—into a short feature. Tentatively titled *I Used to Love You*, the project will cut against 50th-anniversary hagiographies of rap greats. She says she has footage of Biggie lecturing Lil' Kim that she needs to wear makeup in public. Hampton says she also has tape of herself chewing out Biggie in the studio for lyrics about robbing pregnant women.

But the clips I watched that day mostly captured what hampton had called "life itself." On a Brooklyn street, she and Biggie sat amid a fleet of double-parked cars filled with members of the rap crew Junior M.A.F.I.A. At one point, the rapper Lil' Cease jumped into the seat next to hampton and flashed a grin. "I met this cutie and her name was dream," he rapped. "Shorty was top choice, had golden brown eyes / def lips and fly thighs." Biggie called for the windows to be rolled down—to "feel a nice little breeze, man"—and hampton's camera followed a plume of pot smoke escaping into the daylight.

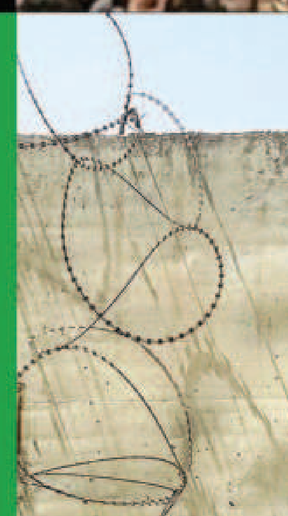
I turned from the screen to look around hampton's basement. It is her working space, bedecked with Post-it Notes about projects and plans. On one wall hung a poster of Jimmy Carter, who is hampton's favorite president. Tacked to a pinboard was a commemorative subway card with Biggie's face on it, W. E. B. Du Bois's farewell letter to the world, and a photo of Apache warriors. There was also a sign expressing, in block letters, a sentiment that hampton had never said out loud to me: BETTER IS POSSIBLE. *A*

Spencer Kornhaber is a staff writer at The Atlantic.





THE FINAL DAYS



BY FRANKLIN FOER







JOE BIDEN WAS DETERMINED TO GET OUT OF AFGHANISTAN—NO MATTER THE COST.



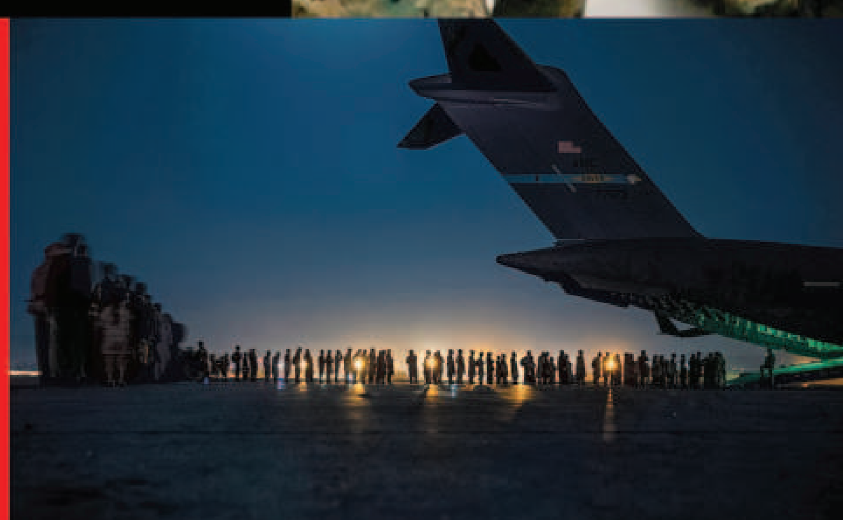


PHOTO-ILLUSTRATION BY GABRIELA PESQUEIRA

AUGUST 1

August is the month when oppressive humidity causes the mass evacuation of official Washington. In 2021, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki piled her family into the car for a week at the beach. Secretary of State Antony Blinken headed to the Hamptons to visit his elderly father. Their boss left for the leafy sanctuary of Camp David.

They knew that when they returned, their attention would shift to a date circled at the end of the month. On August 31, the United States would officially complete its withdrawal from Afghanistan, concluding the longest war in American history.

The State Department didn't expect to solve Afghanistan's problems by that date. But if everything went well, there was a chance to wheedle the two warring sides into some sort of agreement that would culminate in the nation's president, Ashraf Ghani, resigning from office, beginning an orderly transfer of power to a governing coalition that included the Taliban. There was even discussion of Blinken flying out, most likely to Doha, Qatar, to preside over the signing of an accord.

It would be an ending, but not the end. Within the State Department there was a strongly held belief: Even after August 31, the embassy in Kabul would remain open. It wouldn't be as robustly staffed, but some aid programs would continue; visas would still be issued. The United States—at least not the State Department—wasn't going to abandon the country.

There were plans for catastrophic scenarios, which had been practiced in tabletop simulations, but no one anticipated that they would be needed. Intelligence assessments asserted that the Afghan military would be able to hold off the Taliban for months, though the number of months kept dwindling as the Taliban conquered terrain more quickly than the analysts had predicted. But as August began, the grim future of Afghanistan seemed to exist in the distance, beyond the end of the month, not on America's watch.

THAT GRIM FUTURE arrived disastrously ahead of schedule. What follows is an intimate history of that excruciating month of withdrawal, as narrated by its participants, based on dozens of interviews conducted shortly after the fact, when memories were fresh and emotions raw. At times, as I spoke with these participants, I felt as if I was their confessor. Their failings were so apparent that they had a desperate need to explain themselves, but also an impulse to relive moments of drama and pain more intense than any they had experienced in their career.

During those fraught days, foreign policy, so often debated in the abstract, or conducted from the sanitized remove of the Situation Room, became horrifyingly vivid. President Joe Biden and his aides found themselves staring hard at the consequences of their decisions.

Even in the thick of the crisis, as the details of a mass evacuation swallowed them, the members of Biden's inner circle could see that the legacy of the month would stalk them into the next election—and perhaps into their obituaries. Though it was a moment when their shortcomings were on obvious display, they also believed it evinced resilience and improvisational skill.

And amid the crisis, a crisis that taxed his character and managerial acumen, the president revealed himself. For a man long caricatured as a political weather vane, Biden exhibited determination, even stubbornness, despite furious criticism from the establishment figures whose approval he usually craved. For a man vaunted for his empathy, he could be detached, even icy, when confronted with the prospect of human suffering.

WHEN IT CAME TO FOREIGN POLICY, Joe Biden possessed a swaggering faith in himself. He liked to knock the diplomats and pundits who would pontificate at the Council on Foreign Relations and the Munich Security Conference. He called them risk-averse, beholden to institutions, lazy in their thinking. Listening to these complaints, a friend once posed the obvious question: If you have such negative things to say about these confabs, then why attend so many of them? Biden replied, "If I don't go, they're going to get stale as hell."

From 12 years as the top Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee—and then eight years as the vice president—Biden had acquired a sense that he could scythe through conventional wisdom. He distrusted mandarins, even those he had hired for his staff. They were always muddying things with theories. One aide recalled that he would say, "You foreign-policy guys, you think this is all pretty complicated. But it's just like family dynamics." Foreign affairs was sometimes painful, often futile, but really it was emotional intelligence applied to people with names that were difficult to pronounce. Diplomacy, in Biden's view, was akin to persuading a pain-in-the-ass uncle to stop drinking so much.

One subject seemed to provoke his contrarian side above all others: the war in Afghanistan. His strong opinions were grounded in experience. Soon after the United States invaded, in late 2001, Biden began visiting the country. He traveled with a sleeping bag; he stood in line alongside Marines, wrapped in a towel, waiting for his turn to shower.

On his first trip, in 2002, Biden met with Interior Minister Yunus Qanuni in his Kabul office, a shell of a building. Qanuni, an old mujahideen fighter, told him: *We really appreciate that you have come here. But Americans have a long history of making promises and then breaking them. And if that happens again, the Afghan people are going to be disappointed.*

Biden was jet-lagged and irritable. Qanuni's comments set him off: *Let me tell you, if you even think of threatening us …* Biden's aides struggled to calm him down.

In Biden's moral code, ingratitude is a grievous sin. The United States had evicted the Taliban from power; it had sent young men to die in the nation's mountains; it would give the new government billions in aid. But throughout the long conflict, Afghan officials kept telling him that the U.S. hadn't done enough.

The frustration stuck with him, and it clarified his thinking. He began to draw unsentimental conclusions about the war. He could see that the Afghan government was a failed enterprise. He could see that a nation-building campaign of this scale was beyond American capacity.

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As vice president, Biden also watched as the military pressured Barack Obama into sending thousands of additional troops to salvage a doomed cause. In his 2020 memoir, *A Promised Land*, Obama recalled that as he agonized over his Afghan policy, Biden pulled him aside and told him, "Listen to me, boss. Maybe I've been around this town for too long, but one thing I know is when these generals are trying to box in a new president." He drew close and whispered, "Don't let them jam you."

Biden developed a theory of how he would succeed where Obama had failed. He wasn't going to let anyone jam him.

IN EARLY FEBRUARY 2021, now-President Biden invited his secretary of defense, Lloyd Austin, and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Mark Milley, into the Oval Office. He wanted to acknowledge an emotional truth: "I know you have friends you have lost in this war. I know you feel strongly. I know what you've put into this."

Over the years, Biden had traveled to military bases, frequently accompanied by his fellow senator Chuck Hagel. On those trips, Hagel and Biden dipped in and out of a long-running conversation about war. They traded theories on why the United States would remain mired in unwinnable conflicts. One problem was the psychology of defeat. Generals were terrified of being blamed for a loss, living in history as the one who waved the white flag.

It was this dynamic, in part, that kept the United States entangled in Afghanistan. Politicians who hadn't served in the military could never summon the will to overrule the generals, and the generals could never admit that they were losing. So the war continued indefinitely, a zombie campaign. Biden believed that he could break this cycle, that he could master the psychology of defeat.

Biden wanted to avoid having his generals feel cornered—even as he guided them to his desired outcome. He wanted them to feel heard, to appreciate his good faith. He told Austin and Milley, "Before I make a decision, you'll have a chance to look me in the eyes."

THE DATE SET out by the Doha Agreement, which the Trump administration had negotiated with the Taliban, was May 1, 2021. If the Taliban adhered to a set of conditions—engaging in political negotiations with the Afghan government, refraining from attacking U.S. troops, and cutting ties with terrorist groups—then the United States would remove its soldiers from the country by that date. Because of the May deadline, Biden's first major foreign-policy decision—whether or not to honor the Doha Agreement—would also be the one he seemed to care most about. And it would need to be made in a sprint.

In the spring, after weeks of meetings with generals and foreign-policy advisers, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan had the National Security Council generate two documents for the president to read. One outlined the best case for staying in Afghanistan; the other made the best case for leaving.

This reflected Biden's belief that he faced a binary choice. If he abandoned the Doha Agreement, attacks on U.S. troops would resume. Since the accord had been signed, in February 2020, the Taliban had grown stronger, forging new alliances and sharpening plans. And thanks to the drawdown of troops that had begun



July 30, 2021: Joe Biden speaks to reporters before departing the White House for Camp David.

under Donald Trump, the United States no longer had a robust-enough force to fight a surging foe.

Biden gathered his aides for one last meeting before he formally made his decision. Toward the end of the session, he asked Sullivan, Blinken, and Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines to leave the room. He wanted to talk with Austin and Milley alone.

Instead of revealing his final decision, Biden told them, "This is hard. I want to go to Camp David this weekend and think about it."

It was always clear where the president would land. Milley knew that his own preferred path for Afghanistan—leaving a small but meaningful contingent of troops in the country—wasn't shared by the nation he served, or the new commander in chief. Having just survived Trump and a wave of speculation about how the U.S. military might figure in a coup, Milley was eager to demonstrate his fidelity to civilian rule. If Biden wanted to shape the process to get his preferred result, well, that's how a democracy should work.

BIDEN'S SPEECH CONTAINED A HOLE THAT FEW NOTED AT THE TIME. IT SCARCELY MENTIONED THE AFGHAN PEOPLE, WITH NOT EVEN AN EXPRESSION OF BEST WISHES FOR THE NATION THE U.S. WOULD BE LEAVING BEHIND.

ON APRIL 14, Biden announced that he would withdraw American forces from Afghanistan. He delivered remarks explaining his decision in the Treaty Room of the White House, the very spot where, in the fall of 2001, George W. Bush had informed the public of the first American strikes against the Taliban.

Biden's speech contained a hole that few noted at the time. It scarcely mentioned the Afghan people, with not even an expression of best wishes for the nation that the United States would be leaving behind. The Afghans were apparently only incidental to his thinking. (Biden hadn't spoken with President Ghani until right before the announcement.) Scranton Joe's deep reserves of compassion were directed at people with whom he felt a connection; his visceral ties were with American soldiers. When he thought about the military's rank and file, he couldn't help but project an image of his own late son, Beau. "I'm the first president in 40 years who knows what it means to have a child serving in a war zone," he said.

Biden also announced a new deadline for the U.S. withdrawal, which would move from May 1 to September 11, the 20th anniversary of the attack that drew the United States into war. The choice of date was polemical. Although he never officially complained about it, Milley didn't understand the decision. How did it honor the dead to admit defeat in a conflict that had been waged on their behalf? Eventually, the Biden administration pushed the withdrawal deadline forward to August 31, an implicit concession that it had erred.

But the choice of September 11 was telling. Biden took pride in ending an unhappy chapter in American history. Democrats might have once referred to Afghanistan as the "good war," but it had become a fruitless fight. It had distracted the United States from policies that might preserve the nation's geostrategic dominance. By leaving Afghanistan, Biden believed he was redirecting the nation's gaze to the future: "We'll be much more formidable to our adversaries and competitors over the long term if we fight the battles for the next 20 years, not the last 20."

AUGUST 6–9

In late June, Jake Sullivan began to worry that the Pentagon had pulled American personnel and materiel out of Afghanistan too precipitously. The rapid drawdown had allowed the Taliban to advance and to win a string of victories against the Afghan army that had caught the administration by surprise. Even if Taliban fighters weren't firing at American troops, they were continuing to battle the Afghan army and take control of the countryside. Now they'd captured a provincial capital in the remote southwest—a victory that was disturbingly effortless.

Sullivan asked one of his top aides, Homeland Security Adviser Elizabeth Sherwood-Randall, to convene a meeting for Sunday, August 8, with officials overseeing the withdrawal. Contingency plans contained a switch that could be flipped in an emergency. To avoid a reprise of the fall of Saigon, with desperate hands clinging to the last choppers out of Vietnam, the government made plans for a noncombatant-evacuation operation, or NEO. The U.S. embassy would shut down and relocate to Hamid Karzai International Airport (or HKIA, as everyone called it). Troops, prepositioned near the Persian Gulf and waiting at Fort Bragg, in North Carolina, would descend on Kabul to protect the airport. Military transport planes would haul American citizens and visa holders out of the country.

By the time Sherwood-Randall had a chance to assemble the meeting, the most pessimistic expectations had been exceeded. The Taliban had captured four more provincial capitals. General Frank McKenzie, the head of U.S. Central Command, filed a commander's

estimate warning that Kabul could be surrounded within about 30 days—a far faster collapse than previously predicted.

McKenzie's dire warning did strangely little to alter plans. Sherwood-Randall's group unanimously agreed that it was too soon to declare a NEO. The embassy in Kabul was particularly forceful on this point. The acting ambassador, Ross Wilson, wanted to avoid cultivating a sense of panic in Kabul, which would further collapse the army and the state. Even the CIA seconded this line of thinking.

AUGUST 12

At 2 a.m., Sullivan's phone rang. It was Mark Milley. The military had received reports that the Taliban had entered the city of Ghazni, less than 100 miles from Kabul.

The intelligence community assumed that the Taliban wouldn't storm Kabul until after the United States left, because the Taliban wanted to avoid a block-by-block battle for the city. But the proximity of the Taliban to the embassy and HKIA was terrifying. It necessitated the decisive action that the administration had thus far resisted. Milley wanted Sullivan to initiate a NEO. If the State Department wasn't going to move quickly, the president needed to order it to. Sullivan assured him that he would push harder, but it would be two more days before the president officially declared a NEO.

With the passage of each hour, Sullivan's anxieties grew. He called Lloyd Austin and told him, "I think you need to send someone with bars on his arm to Doha to talk to the Taliban so that they understand not to mess with an evacuation." Austin agreed to dispatch General McKenzie to renew negotiations.

AUGUST 13

Austin convened a videoconference with the top civilian and military officials in Kabul. He wanted updates from them before he headed to the White House to brief the president.

Ross Wilson, the acting ambassador, told him, "I need 72 hours before I can begin destroying sensitive documents."

"You have to be *done* in 72 hours," Austin replied.

The Taliban were now perched outside Kabul. Delaying the evacuation of the embassy posed a danger that Austin couldn't abide. Thousands of troops were about to arrive to protect the new makeshift facility that would be set up at the airport. The moment had come to move there.

Abandoning an embassy has its own protocols; they are rituals of panic. The diplomats had a weekend, more or less, to purge the place: to fill its shredders, burn bins, and disintegrator with documents and hard drives. Anything with an American flag on it needed destroying so it couldn't be used by the enemy for propaganda purposes.

Wisps of smoke would soon begin to blow from the compound—a plume of what had been classified cables and personnel files. Even for those Afghans who didn't have access to the internet, the narrative would be legible in the sky.

AUGUST 14

On Saturday night, Antony Blinken placed a call to Ashraf Ghani. He wanted to make sure the Afghan president remained committed to the negotiations in Doha. The Taliban delegation there was still prepared to agree to a unity government, which it might eventually run, allocating cabinet slots to ministers from Ghani's government. That notion had broad support from the Afghan political elite. Everyone, even Ghani, agreed that he would need to resign as part of a deal. Blinken wanted to ensure that he wouldn't waver from his commitments and try to hold on to power.

Although Ghani said that he would comply, he began musing aloud about what might happen if the Taliban invaded Kabul prior to August 31. He told Blinken, "I'd rather die than surrender."

AUGUST 15

The next day, the presidential palace released a video of Ghani talking with security officials on the phone. As he sat at his imposing wooden desk, which once belonged to King Amanullah, who had bolted from the palace to avoid an Islamist uprising in 1929, Ghani's aides hoped to project a sense of calm.

During the early hours, a small number of Taliban fighters eased their way to the gates of the city, and then into the capital itself. The Taliban leadership didn't want to invade Kabul until after the American departure. But their soldiers had conquered territory without even firing a shot. In their path, Afghan soldiers simply walked away from checkpoints. Taliban units kept drifting in the direction of the presidential palace.

Rumors traveled more quickly than the invaders. A crowd formed outside a bank in central Kabul. Nervous customers jostled in a chaotic rush to empty their accounts. Guards fired into the air to disperse the melee. The sound of gunfire reverberated through the nearby palace, which had largely emptied for lunch. Ghani's closest advisers pressed him to flee. "If you stay," one told him, according to *The Washington Post*, "you'll be killed."

This was a fear rooted in history. In 1996, when the Taliban first invaded Kabul, they hanged the tortured body of the former president from a traffic light. Ghani hustled onto one of three Mi-17 helicopters waiting inside his compound, bound for Uzbekistan. *The New York Times Magazine* later reported that the helicopters were instructed to fly low to the terrain, to evade detection by the U.S. military. From Uzbekistan, he would fly to the United Arab Emirates and an ignominious exile. Without time to pack, he left in plastic sandals, accompanied by his wife. On the tarmac, aides and guards grappled over the choppers' last remaining seats.

When the rest of Ghani's staff returned from lunch, they moved through the palace searching for the president, unaware that he had abandoned them, and their country.

AT APPROXIMATELY 1:45 P.M., Ambassador Wilson went to the embassy lobby for the ceremonial lowering of the flag. Emotionally drained and worried about his own safety, he prepared to leave the embassy behind, a monument to his nation's defeat.

Wilson made his way to the helicopter pad so that he could be taken to his new outpost at the airport, where he was told that a trio of choppers had just left the presidential palace. Wilson knew what that likely meant. By the time he relayed his suspicions to Washington, officials already possessed intelligence that confirmed Wilson's hunch: Ghani had fled.

Jake Sullivan relayed the news to Biden, who exploded in frustration: *Give me a break*.

LATER THAT AFTERNOON, General McKenzie arrived at the Ritz-Carlton in Doha. Well before Ghani's departure from power, the wizened Marine had scheduled a meeting with an old adversary of the United States, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar.

Baradar wasn't just any Taliban leader. He was a co-founder of the group, with Mullah Mohammed Omar. McKenzie had arrived with the intention of delivering a stern warning. He barely had time to tweak his agenda after learning of Ghani's exit.

McKenzie unfolded a map of Afghanistan translated into Pashto. A circle had been drawn around the center of Kabul—a radius of about 25 kilometers—and he pointed to it. He referred to this area as the "ring of death." If the Taliban operated within those 25 kilometers, McKenzie said, "we're going to assume hostile intent, and we'll strike hard."

McKenzie tried to bolster his threat with logic. He said he didn't want to end up in a firefight with the Taliban, and that would be a lot less likely to happen if they weren't in the city.

Baradar not only understood; he agreed. Known as a daring military tactician, he was also a pragmatist. He wanted to transform his group's inhospitable image; he hoped that foreign embassies, even the American one, would remain in Kabul. Baradar didn't want a Taliban government to become a pariah state, starved of foreign assistance that it badly needed.

But the McKenzie plan had an elemental problem: It was too late. Taliban fighters were already operating within the ring of death. Kabul was on the brink of anarchy. Armed criminal gangs were already starting to roam the streets. Baradar asked the general, "Are you going to take responsibility for the security of Kabul?"

McKenzie replied that his orders were to run an evacuation. Whatever happens to the security situation in Kabul, he told Baradar, don't mess with the evacuation, or there will be hell to pay. It was an evasive answer. The United States didn't have the troops or the will to secure Kabul. McKenzie had no choice but to implicitly cede that job to the Taliban.

Baradar walked toward a window. Because he didn't speak English, he wanted his adviser to confirm his understanding. "Is he saying that he won't attack us if we go in?" His adviser told him that he had heard correctly.

As the meeting wrapped up, McKenzie realized that the United States would need to be in constant communication with the Taliban. They were about to be rubbing shoulders with each other in a dense city. Misunderstandings were inevitable. Both sides agreed that they would designate a representative in Kabul to talk through the many complexities so that the old enemies could muddle together toward a common purpose.

Soon after McKenzie and Baradar ended their meeting, Al Jazeera carried a live feed from the presidential palace, showing the Taliban as they went from room to room, in awe of the building, seemingly bemused by their own accomplishment.



August 15: Taliban fighters take control of the presidential palace in Kabul.

They gathered in Ghani's old office, where a book of poems remained on his desk, across from a box of Kleenex. A Talib sat in the president's Herman Miller chair. His comrades stood behind him in a tableau, cloth draped over the shoulders of their tunics, guns resting in the crooks of their arms, as if posing for an official portrait.

AUGUST 16

The U.S. embassy, now relocated to the airport, became a magnet for humanity. The extent of Afghan desperation shocked officials back in Washington. Only amid the panicked exodus did top officials at the State Department realize that hundreds of thousands of Afghans had fled their homes as civil war swept through the countryside—and made their way to the capital.

The runway divided the airport into halves. A northern sector served as a military outpost and, after the relocation of the embassy, a consular office—the last remaining vestiges of the United States and its promise of liberation. A commercial airport stared at these barracks from across the strip of asphalt.

The commercial facility had been abandoned by the Afghans who worked there. The night shift of air-traffic controllers simply never arrived. The U.S. troops whom Austin had ordered to support the evacuation were only just arriving. So the terminal was overwhelmed. Afghans began to spill onto the tarmac itself.

The crowds arrived in waves. The previous day, Afghans had flooded the tarmac late in the day, then left when they realized that no flights would depart that evening. But in the morning, the compound still wasn't secure, and it refilled.

In the chaos, it wasn't entirely clear to Ambassador Wilson who controlled the compound. The Taliban began freely roaming the facility, wielding bludgeons, trying to secure the mob. Apparently, they were working alongside soldiers from the old Afghan army. Wilson received worrying reports of tensions between the two forces.

The imperative was to begin landing transport planes with equipment and soldiers. A C-17, a warehouse with wings, full of supplies to support the arriving troops, managed to touch down. The crew lowered a ramp to unload the contents of the jet's belly, but the plane was rushed by a surge of civilians. The Americans on board were no less anxious than the Afghans who greeted them. Almost as quickly as the plane's back ramp lowered, the crew reboarded and resealed the jet's entrances. They received permission to flee the uncontrolled scene.

But they could not escape the crowd, for whom the jet was a last chance to avoid the Taliban and the suffering to come. As the plane began to taxi, about a dozen Afghans climbed onto one side of the jet. Others sought to stow away in the wheel well that housed its bulging landing gear. To clear the runway of human traffic, Humvees began rushing alongside the plane. Two Apache helicopters flew just above the ground, to give the Afghans a good scare and to blast the civilians from the plane with rotor wash.

Only after the plane had lifted into the air did the crew discover its place in history. When the pilot couldn't fully retract the landing gear, a member of the crew went to investigate, staring out of a small porthole. Through the window, it was possible to see scattered human remains.

Videos taken from the tarmac instantly went viral. They showed a dentist from Kabul plunging to the ground from the elevating jet. The footage evoked the photo of a man falling to his death from an upper story of the World Trade Center—images of plummeting bodies bracketing an era.

Over the weekend, Biden had received briefings about the chaos in Kabul in a secure conference room at Camp David. Photographs distributed to the press showed him alone, talking to screens, isolated in his contrarian faith in the righteousness of his decision. Despite the fiasco at the airport, he returned to the White House, stood in the East Room, and proclaimed: "If anything, the developments of the past week reinforced that ending U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan now was the right decision. American troops cannot and should not be fighting in a war and dying in a war that Afghan forces are not willing to fight for themselves."

AUGUST 17

John Bass was having a hard time keeping his mind on the task at hand. From 2017 to 2020, he had served as Washington's ambassador to Afghanistan. During that tour, Bass did his best to immerse himself in the country and meet its people. He'd planted a garden with a group of Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts and hosted roundtables with journalists. When his term as ambassador ended, he left behind friends, colleagues, and hundreds of acquaintances.

Now Bass kept his eyes on his phone, checking for any word from his old Afghan network. He moved through his day dreading what might come next.

Yet he also had a job that required his attention. The State Department had assigned him to train future ambassadors. In a seminar room in suburban Virginia, he did his best to focus on passing along wisdom to these soon-to-be emissaries of the United States.

As class was beginning, his phone lit up. Bass saw the number of the State Department Operations Center. He apologized and stepped out to take the call.

"Are you available to talk to Deputy Secretary Sherman?"

The familiar voice of Wendy Sherman, the No. 2 at the department, came on the line. "I have a mission for you. You must take it, and you need to leave today." Sherman then told him: "I'm calling to ask you to go back to Kabul to lead the evacuation effort."

Ambassador Wilson was shattered by the experience of the past week and wasn't "able to function at the level that was necessary" to complete the job on his own. Sherman needed Bass to help manage the exodus.

Bass hadn't expected the request. In his flummoxed state, he struggled to pose the questions he thought he might later regret not having asked.

"How much time do we have?"

"Probably about two weeks, a little less than two weeks."

"I've been away from this for 18 months or so."

"Yep, we know, but we think you're the right person for this."

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Bass returned to class and scooped up his belongings. "With apologies, I'm going to have to take my leave. I've just been asked to go back to Kabul and support the evacuations. So I've got to say goodbye and wish you all the best, and you're all going to be great ambassadors."

Because he wasn't living in Washington, Bass didn't have the necessary gear with him. He drove straight to the nearest REI in search of hiking pants and rugged boots. He needed to pick up a laptop from the IT department in Foggy Bottom. Without knowing much more than what was in the news, Bass rushed to board a plane taking him to the worst crisis in the recent history of American foreign policy.

AUGUST 19–25

About 30 hours later—3:30 a.m., Kabul time—Bass touched down at HKIA and immediately began touring the compound. At the American headquarters, he ran into the military heads of the operation, whom he had worked with before. They presented Bass with the state of play. The situation was undeniably bizarre: The success of the American operation now depended largely on the cooperation of the Taliban.

The Americans needed the Taliban to help control the crowds that had formed outside the airport—and to implement systems that would allow passport and visa holders to pass through the throngs. But the Taliban were imperfect allies at best. Their checkpoints were run by warriors from the countryside who didn't know how to deal with the array of documents being waved in their faces. What was an authentic visa? What about families where the father had a U.S. passport but his wife and children didn't? Every day, a new set of Taliban soldiers seemed to arrive at checkpoints, unaware of the previous day's directions. Frustrated with the unruliness, the Taliban would sometimes simply stop letting anyone through.

Abdul Ghani Baradar's delegation in Doha had passed along the name of a Taliban commander in Kabul—Mawlawi Hamdullah Mukhlis. It had fallen to Major General Chris Donahue, the head of the 82nd Airborne Division, out of Fort Bragg, to coordinate with him. On September 11, 2001, Donahue had been an aide to the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Richard Myers, and had been with him on Capitol Hill when the first plane struck the World Trade Center.

Donahue told Pentagon officials that he had to grit his teeth as he dealt with Mukhlis. But the Taliban commander seemed to feel a camaraderie with his fellow soldier. He confided to Donahue his worry that Afghanistan would suffer from brain drain, as the country's most talented minds evacuated on American airplanes.

In a videoconference with Mark Milley, back at the Pentagon, Donahue recounted Mukhlis's fears. According to one Defense Department official in the meeting, his description caused Milley to laugh.

"Don't be going local on me, Donahue," he said.

"Don't worry about me, sir," Donahue responded. "I'm not buying what they are selling."

After Bass left his meeting with the military men, including Donahue, he toured the gates of the airport, where Afghans had amassed. He was greeted by the smell of feces and urine, by the sound of gunshots and bullhorns blaring instructions in Dari and Pashto. Dust assaulted his eyes and nose. He felt the heat that emanated from human bodies crowded into narrow spaces.

The atmosphere was tense. Marines and consular officers, some of whom had flown into Kabul from other embassies, were trying to pull passport and visa holders from the crowd. But every time they waded into it, they seemed to provoke a furious reaction. To get plucked from the street by the Americans smacked of cosmic unfairness to those left behind. Sometimes the anger swelled beyond control, so the troops shut down entrances to allow frustrations to subside. Bass was staring at despair in its rawest form. As he studied the people surrounding the airport, he wondered if he could ever make any of this a bit less terrible.

> THE SITUATION WAS UNDENIABLY BIZARRE: THE SUCCESS OF THE AMERICAN OPERATION NOW DEPENDED LARGELY ON THE COOPERATION OF THE TALIBAN.

Bass cadged a room in barracks belonging to the Turkish army, which had agreed, before the chaos had descended, to operate and protect the airport after the Americans finally departed. His days tended to follow a pattern. They would begin with the Taliban's grudging assistance. Then, as lunchtime approached, the Talibs would get hot and hungry. Abruptly, they would stop processing evacuees through their checkpoints. Then, just as suddenly, at six or seven, as the sun began to set, they would begin to cooperate again.

Bass was forever hatching fresh schemes to satisfy the Taliban's fickle requirements. One day, the Taliban would let buses through without question; the next, they would demand to see passenger manifests in advance. Bass's staff created official-looking placards to place in bus windows. The Taliban waved them through for a short period, then declared the placard system unreliable.

Throughout the day, Bass would stop what he was doing and join videoconferences with Washington. He became a fixture in the Situation Room. Biden would pepper him with ideas for squeezing

more evacuees through the gates. The president's instinct was to throw himself into the intricacies of troubleshooting. *Why don't we have them meet in parking lots? Can't we leave the airport and pick them up?* Bass would kick around Biden's proposed solutions with colleagues to determine their plausibility, which was usually low. Still, he appreciated Biden applying pressure, making sure that he didn't overlook the obvious.

At the end of his first day at the airport, Bass went through his email. A State Department spokesperson had announced Bass's arrival in Kabul. Friends and colleagues had deluged him with requests to save Afghans. Bass began to scrawl the names from his inbox on a whiteboard in his office. By the time he finished, he'd filled the six-foot-by-four-foot surface. He knew there was little chance that he could help. The orders from Washington couldn't have been clearer. The primary objective was to load planes with U.S. citizens, U.S.-visa holders, and passport holders from partner nations, mostly European ones.

In his mind, Bass kept another running list, of Afghans he had come to know personally during his time as ambassador who were beyond his ability to rescue. Their faces and voices were etched in his memory, and he could be sure that, at some point when he wasn't rushing to fill C-17s, they would haunt his sleep.

"SOMEONE ON THE BUS is dying."

Jake Sullivan was unnerved. What to do with such a dire message from a trusted friend? It described a caravan of five blue-and-white buses stuck 100 yards outside the south gate of the airport, one of them carrying a human being struggling for life. If Sullivan forwarded this problem to an aide, would it get resolved in time?

Sullivan sometimes felt as if every member of the American elite was simultaneously asking for his help. When he left secure rooms, he would grab his phone and check his personal email accounts, which overflowed with pleas. *This person just had the Taliban threaten them. They will be shot in 15 hours if you don't get them out.* Some of the senders seemed to be trying to shame him into action. *If you don't do something, their death is on your hands.*

Throughout late August, the president himself was fielding requests to help stranded Afghans, from friends and members of Congress. Biden became invested in individual cases. Three buses of women at the Kabul Serena Hotel kept running into logistical obstacles. He told Sullivan, "I want to know what happens to them. I want to know when they make it to the airport." When the president heard these stories, he would become engrossed in solving the practical challenge of getting people to the airport, mapping routes through the city.

When Wendy Sherman, the deputy secretary of state, went to check in with members of a task force working on the evacuation, she found grizzled diplomats in tears. She estimated that a quarter of the State Department's personnel had served in Afghanistan. They felt a connection with the country, an emotional entanglement. Fielding an overwhelming volume of emails describing hardship cases, they easily imagined the faces of refugees. They felt the shame and anger that come with the inability to help. To deal with the trauma, the State Department procured therapy dogs that might ease the staff's pain.

The State Department redirected the attention of its sprawling apparatus to Afghanistan. Embassies in Mexico City and New Delhi became call centers. Staff in those distant capitals assumed the role of caseworkers, assigned to stay in touch with the remaining American citizens in Afghanistan, counseling them through the terrifying weeks.

Sherman dispatched her Afghan-born chief of staff, Mustafa Popal, to HKIA to support embassy workers and serve as an interpreter. All day long, Sherman responded to pleas for help: from foreign governments' representatives, who joined a daily videoconference she hosted; from members of Congress; from the cellist Yo-Yo Ma, writing on behalf of musicians. Amid the crush, she felt compelled to go down to the first floor, to spend 15 minutes cuddling the therapy dogs.

THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION hadn't intended to conduct a full-blown humanitarian evacuation of Afghanistan. It had imagined an orderly and efficient exodus that would extend past August 31, as visa holders boarded commercial flights from the country. As those plans collapsed, the president felt the same swirl of emotions as everyone else watching the desperation at the airport. Over the decades, he had thought about Afghanistan using the cold logic of realism—it was a strategic distraction, a project whose costs outweighed the benefits. Despite his many visits, the country had become an abstraction in his mind. But the graphic suffering in Kabul awakened in him a compassion that he'd never evinced in the debates about the withdrawal.

After seeing the abject desperation on the HKIA tarmac, the president had told the Situation Room that he wanted all the planes flying thousands of troops into the airport to leave filled with evacuees. Pilots should pile American citizens and Afghans with visas into those planes. But there was a category of evacuees that he now especially wanted to help, what the government called "Afghans at risk." These were the newspaper reporters, the schoolteachers, the filmmakers, the lawyers, the members of a girls' robotics team who didn't necessarily have paperwork but did have every reason to fear for their well-being in a Taliban-controlled country.

This was a different sort of mission. The State Department hadn't vetted all of the Afghans at risk. It didn't know if they were genuinely endangered or simply strivers looking for a better life. It didn't know if they would have qualified for the visas that the administration said it issued to those who worked with the Americans, or if they were petty criminals. But if they were in the right place at the right time, they were herded up the ramp of C-17s.

In anticipation of an evacuation, the United States had built housing at Camp As Sayliyah, a U.S. Army base in the suburbs of Doha. It could hold 8,000 people, housing them as the Department of Homeland Security collected their biometric data and began to vet them for immigration. But it quickly became clear that the United States would fly far more than 8,000 Afghans to Qatar.

As the numbers swelled, the United States set up tents at Al Udeid Air Base, a bus ride away from As Sayliyah. Nearly 15,000 Afghans took up residence there, but their quarters were poorly planned. There weren't nearly enough toilets or showers. Procuring lunch meant standing in line for three or four hours.





Single men slept in cots opposite married women, a transgression of Afghan traditions.

The Qataris, determined to use the crisis to burnish their reputation, erected a small city of air-conditioned wedding tents and began to cater meals for the refugees. But the Biden administration knew that the number of evacuees would soon exceed Qatar's capacity. It needed to erect a network of camps. What it created was something like the hub-and-spoke system used by commercial airlines. Refugees would fly into Al Udeid and then be redirected to bases across the Middle East and Europe, what the administration termed "lily pads."

In September, just as refugees were beginning to arrive at Dulles International Airport, outside Washington, D.C., four Afghan evacuees caught the measles. All the refugees in the Middle East and Europe now needed vaccinations, which would require 21 days for immunity to take hold. To keep disease from flying into the United States, the State Department called around the world, asking if Afghans could stay on bases for three extra weeks.

In the end, the U.S. government housed more than 60,000 Afghans in facilities that hadn't existed before the fall of Kabul. It flew 387 sorties from HKIA. At the height of the operation, an aircraft took off every 45 minutes. A terrible failure of planning necessitated a mad scramble—a mad scramble that was an impressive display of creative determination.

EVEN AS THE ADMINISTRATION pulled off this feat of logistics, it was pilloried for the clumsiness of the withdrawal. *The New York Times*' David Sanger had written, "After seven months in which his administration seemed to exude much-needed competence—getting more than 70 percent of the country's adults vaccinated, engineering surging job growth and making progress toward a bipartisan infrastructure bill—everything about America's last days in Afghanistan shattered the imagery."

Biden didn't have time to voraciously consume the news, but he was well aware of the coverage, and it infuriated him. It did little to change his mind, though. In the caricature version of Joe Biden that had persisted for decades, he was highly sensitive to shifts in opinion, especially when they emerged from columnists at the *Post* or the *Times*. The criticism of the withdrawal caused him to justify the chaos as the inevitable consequence of a difficult decision, even though he had never publicly, or privately, predicted it. Through the whole last decade of the Afghan War, he had detested the conventional wisdom of the foreign-policy elites. They were willing to stay forever, no matter the cost. After defying their delusional promises of progress for so long, he wasn't going to back down now. In fact, everything he'd witnessed from his seat in the Situation Room confirmed his belief that exiting a war without hope was the best and only course.

So much of the commentary felt overheated to him. He said to an aide: *Either the press is losing its mind, or I am.*

AUGUST 26

Every intelligence official watching Kabul was obsessed with the possibility of an attack by ISIS-Khorasan, or ISIS-K, the Afghan offshoot of the Islamic State, which dreamed of a new caliphate in Central Asia. As the Taliban stormed across Afghanistan, they unlocked a prison at Bagram Air Base, freeing hardened ISIS-K adherents. ISIS-K had been founded by veterans of the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban who had broken with their groups, on the grounds that they needed to be replaced by an even more militant vanguard. The intelligence community had been sorting through a roaring river of unmistakable warnings about an imminent assault on the airport.

JIM HUYLEBROEK; ASSOCIATED PRESS



August 24: Afghan families hoping to flee the country arrive at Hamid Karzai International Airport at dawn.

August 29: President Biden watches as the remains of a Marine killed in the attack on Hamid Karzai International Airport are returned to Dover Air Force Base.

As the national-security team entered the Situation Room for a morning meeting, it consumed an early, sketchy report of an explosion at one of the gates to HKIA, but it was hard to know if there were any U.S. casualties. Everyone wanted to believe that the United States had escaped unscathed, but everyone had too much experience to believe that. General McKenzie appeared via videoconference in the Situation Room with updates that confirmed the room's suspicions of American deaths. Biden hung his head and quietly absorbed the reports. In the end, the explosion killed 13 U.S. service members and more than 150 Afghan civilians.

AUGUST 29–30

THE REMAINS of the dead service members were flown to Dover Air Force Base, in Delaware, for a ritual known as the dignified transfer: Flag-draped caskets are marched down the gangway of a transport plane and driven to the base's mortuary.

So much about the withdrawal had slipped beyond Biden's control. But grieving was his expertise. If there was one thing that everyone agreed Biden did more adroitly than any other public official, it was comforting survivors. The Irish journalist Fintan O'Toole once called him "the Designated Mourner."

Accompanied by his wife, Jill; Mark Milley; Antony Blinken; and Lloyd Austin, Biden made his way to a private room where grieving families had gathered. He knew he would be standing face to face with unbridled anger. A father had already turned his back on Austin and was angrily shouting at Milley, who held up his hands in the posture of surrender.

When Biden entered, he shook the hand of Mark Schmitz, who had lost his 20-year-old son, Jared. In his sorrow, Schmitz couldn't decide whether he wanted to sit in the presence of the president. According to a report in *The Washington Post*, the night before, he had told a military officer that he didn't want to speak to the man whose incompetence he blamed for his son's death. In the morning, he changed his mind.

Schmitz told the *Post* that he couldn't help but glare in Biden's direction. When Biden approached, he held out a photo of Jared. "Don't you ever forget that name. Don't you ever forget that face. Don't you ever forget the names of the other 12. And take some time to learn their stories."

"I do know their stories," Biden replied.

After the dignified transfer, the families piled onto a bus. A sister of one of the dead screamed in Biden's direction: "I hope you burn in hell."

Of all the moments in August, this was the one that caused the president to second-guess himself. He asked Press Secretary Jen Psaki: *Did I do something wrong? Maybe I should have handled that differently*.

As Biden left, Milley saw the pain on the president's face. He told him: "You made a decision that had to be made. War is a brutal, vicious undertaking. We're moving forward to the next step."

THAT AFTERNOON, Biden returned to the Situation Room. There was pressure, from the Hill and talking heads, to push back the August 31 deadline. But everyone in the room was terrified by the intelligence assessments about ISIS-K. If the U.S. stayed, it would be hard to avoid the arrival of more caskets at Dover.

As Biden discussed the evacuation, he received a note, which he passed to Milley. According to a White House official present in the room, the general read it aloud: "If you want to catch the 5:30 Mass, you have to leave now." He turned to the president. "My mother always said it's okay to miss Mass if you're doing something important. And I would argue that this is important." He paused, realizing that the president might need a moment after his bruising day. "This is probably also a time when we need prayers."

Biden gathered himself to leave. As he stood from his chair, he told the group, "I will be praying for all of you."

ON THE MORNING of the 30th, John Bass was cleaning out his office. An alarm sounded, and he rushed for cover. A rocket flew over the airport from the west and a second crashed into the compound, without inflicting damage.

Bass, ever the stoic, turned to a colleague. "Well, that's about the only thing that hasn't happened so far." He was worried that the rockets weren't a parting gift, but a prelude to an attack.

Earlier that morning, though, Bass had implored Major General Donahue to delay the departure. He'd asked his military colleagues to remain at the outer access points, because there were reports of American citizens still making their way to them.

Donahue was willing to give Bass a few extra hours. And around 3 a.m., 60 more American-passport holders arrived at the airport. Then, as if anticipating a final burst of American generosity toward refugees, the Taliban opened their checkpoints. A flood of Afghans rushed toward the airport. Bass sent consular officers to stand at the perimeter of concertina wire, next to the paratroopers, scanning for passports, visas, any official-looking document.



August 31: President Biden delivers remarks on the end of the war in Afghanistan.

An officer caught a glimpse of an Afghan woman in her 20s waving a printout showing that she had received permission to enter the U.S. "Wow. You won the lottery twice," he told her. "You're the visa-lottery winner and you've made it here in time." She was one of the final evacuees hustled into the airport.

Around 7 a.m., the last remaining State Department officials in Kabul, including Bass, posed for a photo and then walked up the ramp of a C-17. As Bass prepared for takeoff, he thought about two numbers. In total, the United States had evacuated about 124,000 people, which the White House touted as the most successful airlift in history. Bass also thought about the unknown number of Afghans he had failed to get out. He thought about the friends he couldn't extricate. He thought about the last time he'd flown out of Kabul, 18 months earlier, and how he had harbored a sense of optimism for the country then. A hopefulness that now felt as remote as the Hindu Kush.

IN A COMMAND CENTER in the Pentagon's basement, Lloyd Austin and Mark Milley followed events at the airport through a video feed provided by a drone, the footage filtered through the hazy shades of a night-vision lens. They watched in silence as Donahue, the last American soldier on the ground in Afghanistan, boarded the last C-17 to depart HKIA.

Five C-17s sat on the runway—carrying "chalk," as the military refers to the cargo of troops. An officer in the command center narrated the procession for them. "Chalk 1 loaded … Chalk 2 taxiing."

As the planes departed, there was no applause, no handshaking. A murmur returned to the room. Austin and Milley watched the great military project of their generation—a war that had cost the lives of comrades, that had taken them away from their families—end without remark. They stood without ceremony and returned to their offices.

ACROSS THE POTOMAC RIVER, Biden sat with Jake Sullivan and Antony Blinken, revising a speech he would deliver the next day. One of Sullivan's aides passed him a note, which he read to the group: "Chalk 1 in the air." A few minutes later, the aide returned with an update. All of the planes were safely away.

Some critics had clamored for Biden to fire the advisers who had failed to plan for the chaos at HKIA, to make a sacrificial offering in the spirit of self-abasement. But Biden never deflected blame onto staff. In fact, he privately expressed gratitude to them. And with the last plane in the air, he wanted Blinken and Sullivan to join him in the private dining room next to the Oval Office as he called Austin to thank him. The secretary of defense hadn't agreed with Biden's withdrawal plan, but he'd implemented it in the spirit of a good soldier.

America's longest war was now finally and officially over. Each man looked exhausted. Sullivan hadn't slept for more than two hours a night over the course of the evacuation. Biden aides sensed that he hadn't rested much better. Nobody needed to mention how the trauma and political scars might never go away, how the month of August had imperiled a presidency. Before returning to the Oval Office, they spent a moment together, lingering in the melancholy. *A*

Franklin Foer is a staff writer at The Atlantic *and the author of* The Last Politician: Inside Joe Biden's White House and the Struggle for America's Future, *from which this article was adapted.*

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"Five years ago, I would have never imagined my life would be like this."

— UMA SINJALI MAGAR

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Culture & Critics



OMNIVORE

I, Sly

Sly Stone tells his story.

By James Parker

Is there a way to look at Sly Stone—a musical genius and, for a couple of years, an avatar of spiritual freedom—that isn't dualistic, split-brained, one thing in opposition to another? That isn't about light versus darkness, up versus down, Logos versus Chaos, good drugs versus bad drugs, having it all versus losing it all, and on and on? "Without contraries is no progression," William Blake said, but still—I find myself groping for another plane of understanding. I want to see him as the angels do. We might need to evolve a little bit to get a handle on this man.

To the binary American eye, certainly, he soared and then he smashed. Sly Stone held the '60s in the palm of his hand. He had the plumage and vibration of Jimi Hendrix and the melodic instinct of Paul McCartney. His music married ballooning hippie consciousness to the tautest and worldliest and most street-facing funk: Its end product, its neurochemical payload, was an amazing, paradoxically wised-up euphoria. A rapture petaled with knowingness, with *slyness*.

Live, he could bend time to his will like James Brown. His band Sly and the Family Stone—polyracial, polygendered, polyfreaking-phonic (you could never quite tell which voice was Sly's, and he himself had several)—was a crucible of joy, a crucible of possibility, an experiment that took on the character of a proof: People *could* live together. America *could* work. Love and justice were real.

RICHARD McCAFFREY / MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES / GETTY; ELLIS HERWIG / *THE BOSTON GLOBE* / GETTY; DAVID WARNER ELLIS / REDFERNS / GETTY; MICHAEL PUTLAND / GETTY

ILLUSTRATION BY JAN ROBERT DÜNNWELLER

For about a minute. "I can't imagine my life without Sly Stone," Cornel West says in the 2017 documentary *On the Sly: In Search of the Family Stone*. "Sly created a music that became a place where we could go to have a foretaste of that freedom, of that democratic experience. Even though we couldn't live it on the ground."

And by 1975 it was essentially over: his creativity squandered, his reputation in tatters, cocaine and PCP and paranoia everywhere. Decades of obscurity followed, punctuated by occasional failed resurrections. Plenty of people, upon hearing about his new memoir, *Thank You (Falettinme Be Mice Elf Agin)*, written with Ben Greenman, will be surprised to learn that he is still alive.

But Sly lives. And the resourceful Greenman, whose publishing credits include the co-writing of a memoir by George Clinton, has coaxed, wheedled, massaged, used God knows what processes of titration and palpation to extract a fascinating book from him. "I have some questions, not too many," he tells his subject in the moody snippet of transcribed conversation that prefaces *Thank You*. "We don't have to do them all." "We don't have to do them at all," answers Sly.

Pretty much the definition of an unreliable narrator, Sly nonetheless has some clear memories. Young Sly, at home in Vallejo, California, watches the cowboys on TV: "I liked Roy Rogers and Gene Autry. My favorite was Lash LaRue. There was no one cooler. He wore all black and used a whip. What for? To keep himself from shooting a motherfucker."

Middle-school, churchgoing Sly is mesmerized by the high-energy soul singers—Sam Cooke, Jackie Wilson—who come out of gospel. "They kept what was holy and added in what was earthy … I wanted to sing like them, control the stage like them." Student Sly, at Vallejo Junior College, has a great teacher: Mr. Froehlich, who explains music theory to him with vision-inducing clarity. "I could see the melodic lines, watch them intertwine. It's wrong to say that it was like shoelaces but it's also wrong to say that it wasn't at least a little like that."

He also has some memory holes, or some places he'd rather not go. "Drugs came in. There were reasons … I was trying to write, trying to play, trying to record. All of that needed to be fueled. But how did that fuel make me feel? A drug is a substance and so the question has substance. A drug can be a temporary escape and so I will temporarily escape that question."

Career-building Sly was a radio DJ in San Francisco, honing his patter, and also a record producer, bedding down in the acid wisps of Haight-Ashbury, tweaking the beat music of the Beau Brummels, tuning up the thumping psych-pop of the Mojo Men, cracking the whip like Lash LaRue. (He forced the Great Society, Grace Slick's pre–Jefferson Airplane band, through 50 takes of "Somebody to Love.") The Family Stone, he tells Ben Greenman, was "a concept—white and black together, male and female both, and women not just singing but playing instruments. That was a big deal back then and it was a big deal on purpose."

He had the plumage and vibration of Hendrix and the melodic instinct of McCartney.

Woodstock was a peak. Just past four in the morning, Sly and the Family Stone played "I Want to Take You Higher," and Sly initiated a call-and-response routine that was like heaven talking to Earth: "Just say *higher* and throw the peace sign up," he exhorted a rained-on, worn-out, crawling-around-in-its-sleeping-bag crowd. "It'll do you no harm." From the darkness came the answer, thousand-voiced, in a wall of affirmation: *Higher!* After Woodstock, Sly remembers in *Thank You*, "everything glowed."

Entropy was already at work. As beautifully as he had realized and organized the Family Stone, Sly was also an arch-orchestrator of turmoil: the control of no control. Endless brinkmanship—Would he show up for the gig or not? And in what condition?—pitched his band into despair. There was a devouringly out-of-it appearance on *The Dick Cavett Show*. Gangsterhood enveloped his household: guns, drugs, sketchy people. At the center of *Thank You*, like a gyre of disruption, is the image of Sly's as-good-as-feral pit bull, Gun, whirling around in pursuit of his own tail. "He was my best friend. He was crazy. He would chase his tail in circles, not for a minute or for an hour but forever." Gun ends up mauling Sly's toddler son, Sylvester Stewart Jr.

For some people, *There's a Riot Goin' On*, Sly's itchy, woozy, drum-machined bummer of a 1971 album, is a masterpiece. For me the drug vibes are too heavy, the flashes of self-awareness too sour and fleeting, the music too much like Gun chasing his own tail. It was certainly groundbreaking: through the crust and downward. The two albums that followed it—*Fresh* (1973) and the insufficiently listened-to *Small Talk* (1974)—were probably better records, better art, but with *Riot*, Sly had cast a long, evil spell on himself and his audience. The Family Stone was falling apart. A disastrous showcase at Radio City Music Hall, in January 1975, had the smell of the end.

So what is it, the Sly Stone story? Utopia colliding with reality? Not that, because Sly was his own kind of realist all along. The slow death of the '60s? Not that either. The '60s were about conflict, and conflict, as far as we can tell, never dies. The space created by Sly and the Family Stone, the blast radius of delight—that, too, will never die. Genius undone by addiction, then: Is that it? Too small, way too small. Look on him rather as a supreme artist, elected and condemned to expand actuality, and thereby to experience himself fully and on the grandest scale—his flaws writ large, his glory almost dazzling, all simultaneous, all one. 𝒜

THANK YOU (FALETTINME BE MICE ELF AGIN): A MEMOIR

Sly Stone With Ben Greenman

AUWA

James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.



ILLUSTRATION BY CHLOE NICLAS

BOOKS

Zadie Smith Has Doubts About Fiction

In her ambitious new novel, she asks whether we expect too much of the genre.

By Jordan Kisner

Is there anything worse than a novel? Is there anyone more vain, more laughable, more exploitative yet morally self-serious than the novelist? Or, as the protagonist of Zadie Smith's sixth novel puts it: "'Oh what does it matter what that man thinks of anything? He's a novelist!' Without meaning to, she had spoken in the same tone with which one might say *He's a child*."

The Fraud opens with an uneasy meeting on a novelist's doorstep in 19th-century London. A "filthy boy" stands at the entrance to a respectable home in Tunbridge Wells, face-to-face with a formidable, black-haired Scottish woman. She is Eliza Touchet, the cousin of William Ainsworth, the novelist, and she has called the boy to fix a crater that has opened up in the house. The second-floor library has caved in under the weight of an absurd number of books, dumping plaster and volumes of British history all over the downstairs parlor.

Inspecting the damage, the boy is disapproving: "The sheer weight of literature you've got here, well, that will put a terrible strain on a house, Mrs Touchet. Terrible strain." When Eliza readily agrees, the boy feels a flicker of anxiety. "Was she laughing at him? Perhaps 'literature' was the wrong word. Perhaps he had pronounced it wrong." He says no more and kneels to measure the size of the hole.

The metaphor is not subtle. This will be a book about the dead weight of literature; the saggy, impractical, possibly elitist enterprise of revering it; the ambivalences and frustrations involved in making it; the embarrassing excess of it all. This will also be a novel about the fear of using the "wrong word," or the right word the wrong way, and what happens when that fear curdles into resentment.

These are topics of the moment, at least in the world of literary criticism. "Siri, what was the novel?" the *New York Times* critic Dwight Garner asked in a recent review "advancing an argument that's been plausibly made for centuries: that literature is dead." (Garner states that Smith's first novel, *White Teeth*, published in 2000, was probably the last novel that "mattered.") Smith, a literary critic herself, asked, "Do we know what fiction *was*?" in an essay for *The New York Review of Books* in 2019, wondering how viable the enterprise remains. *The Fraud* poses this question in the contested genre itself.

Eliza Touchet, as it happens, wasn't making fun of the boy—she's revolted by the pursuit of literature herself. Since being widowed in her early 20s, she has functioned as factotum and housekeeper for her writer cousin, originally helping his wife, Frances, care for their children whenever he had the itch to run off to Europe to "see beauty and write." After Frances died, Eliza moved in to help finish raising the children, and she has become Ainsworth's right hand: his first reader, his lover, the hostess of the literary salons he throws for his friends Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, George Cruikshank, and so forth. Ainsworth, whose career thrived during his younger years, is charming and prolific, but also conceited, out of touch, and a mediocre talent. By the time the ceiling caves in, he's a has-been in denial, churning out historical fiction—a genre Eliza considers regrettable—that no one wants to read.

Eliza sits down to comment on Ainsworth's latest manuscript, which is as she expects it to be: boring, badly written, and completely unoriginal. "Everything had been used before or was lifted from life … From such worn cloth and stolen truth are novels made. More and more the whole practice wearied her, even to the point of disgust." Ainsworth, anxious, demands to know what she thinks. Eliza declares it a triumph.

BOTH AINSWORTH AND TOUCHET are based on real people—William Ainsworth was a popular novelist of the Victorian era, more successful than even his friend Dickens in their early careers. His work has been largely forgotten, and very little is known about his cousin by marriage, Eliza Touchet,

whom Smith adopts as the protagonist for this book. In other words, *The Fraud* is historical fiction, the regrettable genre. There are echoes of George Eliot, whose *Middlemarch* Eliza admires. The obsession with social mores and manners, alongside extended scenes of drawing-room gossip, recalls Jane Austen. This is not merely a novel; it is a pastiche of the Great English Novels. (This is a familiar feature in Smith's fiction: *On Beauty* was a riff on E. M. Forster's *Howards End*; *NW* is in fairly explicit dialogue with the work of Virginia Woolf.)

Presiding over it all is the specter of Dickens. In the world of *The Fraud*, Dickens's ascension to the role of Great Novelist is a thorn in Ainsworth's side. Eliza objects to Dickens on ethical grounds: Though he is renowned as a kind of genius-saint, credited with surpassing sympathy for the plight of the working man, Eliza knows him to be something closer to a vulture—or a pickpocket. He and Ainsworth hang around the working poor not out of any humanitarian impulse but in search of material. They want to appropriate their language and sell it to the middle class as entertainment. "Keep stealing, my friends! From life for fiction, and from fiction for life. What a terrible business," she thinks. "At least William did it clumsily, with benign incompetence. Whereas his friend Charles had done it like a master—like an actor. That was precisely what was so dangerous about him."

Smith herself wrestles, as she recently wrote in a *New Yorker* essay, with the legacy of Dickens's mark on the genre. Dickens adapted the novel into a mode of social commentary, which transformed it into a political tool—and elevated the novelist to a new moral and political stature. He didn't only write great stories; he critiqued the poverty, hypocrisy, greed, and inhumanity of British society. He did what novelists today are under pressure to do: He was brilliantly entertaining, incisively political, wildly best-selling, and *world-changing*.

But are novelists effective or reliable enough to be tasked with representing the political and social realities around them? Smith seems unsure. She called fiction "our indefensible art" in her 2019 essay about the genre's purposes and methods, wading into the controversy over writers inhabiting subjective positions different from their own—white American women writing Mexican-refugee characters, say, an example that soon stirred debate. Is this appropriation and parasitism, or is it imaginative empathy? "Has fiction, over the centuries, been the creator of compassion or a vehicle for containment? I think we can make both cases." Either way, Smith argues, occupying other consciousnesses is inescapable for the novelist. She recalls seeing, when she was young, a cartoon of Charles Dickens:

> The image of contentment, surrounded by all his characters come to life. I found that image comforting. Dickens didn't look worried or ashamed. Didn't appear to suspect he might be schizophrenic or in some other way pathological. He had a name for his condition: novelist. Early in my life, this became my cover story, too.

Are novelists effective or reliable enough to be tasked with representing the political and social realities around them? Zadie Smith seems unsure.

Portrayed this way, the novelist is not just an individual but a chorus of humanity, many distinct selves held within and expressed by a single mind. Smith's understanding of herself as a writer is related to a desire to air "all the other voices inside me, serving to make the idea of my 'own voice' indistinct." This is a lovely notion of what fiction can be: an art form in which the self operates as a gateway into a realm of other selves, enabled by "a kind of awareness, attended by questions. What is it like to be that person? To feel what they feel? I wonder. Can I use what I feel to imagine what the other feels?"

This conception of fiction also suggests that the novel is inescapably a kind of self-portraiture, one that may contain insights about society and contemporary politics and ideology and all the rest, but in a terribly limited way. What Dickens is doing in a work like *Oliver Twist*, Eliza insists, isn't benevolent fabrication or ethical social commentary; he's merely reflecting his own obsessions, desires, ego. These conflicting truths happen to coexist, Smith suggests: The novelist is ideally expansive beyond the self; the novelist is always blinkered by the self. Whether the work is defensible has less to do with this double bind than with the writing itself, she argues. "Belief in a novel is, for me, a by-product of a certain type of sentence … If the sentences don't speak to me, nothing else will."

THE CENTRAL IRONY of *The Fraud* is that the professional novelist writes bad sentences and ignores the greatest plot of the age. Ainsworth works away on his historical novels while London raptly follows the Tichborne trial. The trial (a real sensation in the early 1870s) features a man claiming to be the long-lost heir to the Tichborne baronetcy. The heir, Roger Tichborne, was supposed to have disappeared at sea as a 25-year-old; now, 10 years later, a butcher from Wagga Wagga, Australia, has appeared in England claiming to be Roger. Most of the family insists that he's an impostor, and not a very good one. The Claimant, as he is called, bears little resemblance to Roger Tichborne. He doesn't recognize family members. He doesn't speak any French, which was Roger Tichborne's first language. And so on.

Still, the trial becomes a flash point for social tensions. The working classes take to the Claimant, seeing

him as a symbol of their own social and economic oppression. The educated classes and aristocracy regard him as a fraud, a laughingstock, and a threat. The divide surfaces in the Ainsworth household as well. Ainsworth's new and very young bride, Sarah, his former maid whom he impregnated, is a passionate fan of the Claimant. Ainsworth and Eliza consider him ridiculous. Still, Eliza agrees to accompany Sarah to watch the trial.

There, she is entranced by Andrew Bogle, the formerly enslaved Jamaican man who served Roger Tichborne's father and insists that the Claimant is the real heir. Even before Eliza hears him speak, Bogle's posture and demeanor inspire in her a new kind of awareness, along with questions. She wants to know his story. She wants, in spite of herself, to write about him. Against her better judgment, she begins working on a novel.

"The Fraud" is the title of the manuscript that Eliza embarks on as she attends the trial, and putatively it refers to the figure at the center of that case, though of course—wink!—the book has any number of frauds worth laying bare or laughing at. There is Ainsworth, still parading as a literary titan. Dickens instrumentalizes the people he is beloved for humanizing. Eliza herself is a fraud of many descriptions: a woman with an unorthodox sexual history (she has carried on affairs with both Ainsworth, whom she dominates sexually, and his first wife, whom she loved) masked as an upright Catholic spinster; a woman who scorns novelists and yet finds herself becoming one in secret.

Smith positions language as the instrument by which all of this fraud is committed. Language is a commodity, a weapon, and a disguise. Sarah cosplays at being a lady of highborn status by abandoning the vernacular of her class and using the word *naturally* as much as possible. Unfortunately, she can't remember when to pronounce her H's. She has no chance: She will never pass.

Smith has long been fascinated by, and is expertly attuned to, the authority and status conferred on those who can wield language entertainingly or persuasively. This is the novelist's prowess—and the politician's and the swindler's. Philosophically, she seems uneasy about the indistinct boundary between the person who uses words to make art and the one who uses words to manipulate others for power. (Is there a difference?) This anxiety plays out in every corner of the novel.

The Claimant himself is suspected of lying because he speaks with a cockney accent, not with the elevated inflections of the Tichbornes. One of the primary debates surrounding the trial is how great a linguistic transformation is possible—a proxy for a more foundational cultural debate happening in Great Britain about who gets to decide what class you belong to or can rise to. You or the state? You or society? How would you need to sound—what words would you need to say—to be believed?

THE FRAUD

Zadie Smith

PENGUIN PRESS

Smith also dwells on what it means to be a poor stylist, showcasing Ainsworth's hilariously bad sentences as evidence of an aesthetic and intellectual deficiency but also a moral one. "He was besotted with his project, especially the 'flash songs,' sung by the criminal and cockney underworld characters, and written in the 'cant' slang he had picked up somewhere," Eliza notes. Where? she asks him. He stole it from someone else's memoir.

Eliza, who functions in part as an avatar for Smith's ideas and concerns as a novelist, is initially set up as Ainsworth's foil—the true novelist, preoccupied with the problem of interiority, and the challenge of genuinely accessing it in others. "What world did they live in, and what unknown and perhaps unknowable mental landscape formed it?" she wonders at the sight of "strange strangers" as she walks down the street. "Could it be deciphered? Guessed at? What can we know of other people?"

If this sounds a little sophomoric, that's because Eliza's moral imagination and curiosity are only barely more sophisticated than Ainsworth's. Despite the revelation that she—a woman who feels herself a social outsider—might share a deep sensibility with someone like Bogle, she is ill-equipped to perceive his full humanity or subjectivity, a fact that becomes clear as *The Fraud* progresses. She doesn't even take seriously the humanity of the other woman she lives with, Sarah, whom she dismisses as a vulgar idiot until, finally, Sarah demands her dignity: "'No, you'll let me speak,' said Sarah, with a new authority. 'I say: I know what you think of me. But where I've come from you can't imagine.'"

Over and over, *The Fraud* insists on the duty of the novelist to deeply imagine the other—a project that may be doomed to fail but remains worth attempting. Smith was a convincing mouthpiece for this argument in *The New York Review of Books* not simply because she's a persuasive critic but because she has made a career writing novels that do this well. *White Teeth*, whether or not you agree that it's the last novel that mattered, garnered early fame for Smith precisely because of the kaleidoscopic (somewhat Dickensian) array of humanity she captured in her characters. Through her subsequent fiction, especially her novel *Swing Time* and her story collection *Grand Union*, this has remained a strength of Smith's.

And yet her characters this time around—Eliza, Ainsworth, Sarah, and the rest—feel more like archetypes than like people. They do not come alive

in the sentences, many of which read like wooden imitation (or unsteady satire) of 19th-century literary argot. *The Fraud* works perhaps better as a meta-novel, an allegory that advances ideas *about* the novel, than as a novel itself. It doesn't quite offer the pleasure of sinking into the consciousness of another person, or even, despite the Victorian particulars, into the texture of a different place and time. The book explicitly signals that this would be a desired effect: In one scene, a younger Eliza looks into a stereoscope that shows three-dimensional images of Ceylon. She's dismissive at first. Why invent a device for seeing the world in three dimensions when you can just look at the world with your own eyes, right in front of you?

> This made everybody laugh, but when it was her turn to put her eyes to the strange machine Mrs Touchet lost her sense of humor. A view of Ceylon. A distant mountain, a lake, three mysterious people in a curious boat. All framed by unknown trees she would never see, not for herself, not in this lifetime.

She is immersed. She is beyond herself. This is what a novel can do. This is what *The Fraud* does not quite do, perhaps because—although the book, at more than 450 pages, is long—Smith is trying to deliver so much else: a rendering of London culture in the 19th century, a commentary on the recently abolished British colonial slave trade, a dramatization of a years-long court case, a Victorian BDSM queer romance. Smith is testing just how much the form can convey about the machinations of empire, gender, creativity, self-determination, and power—and how much the form can convey about itself. The weight of fictional ambition flattens her characters. The book seems, in moments, like a contest between Smith the novelist and Smith the critic, and the critic proves stronger.

Eliza herself acts from motives that are left vague. What drives her, for example, to write? How does she understand what she's doing as she ventures into the creative and ethical territories she has disparaged others for treading on? What would artistic success in this form look like to her? More than once, I puzzled over what she wanted. But then, maybe Eliza doesn't fully know what she wants, or why she does what she does. We are mysteries to ourselves, first and foremost—even, or especially, novelists. *A*

Jordan Kisner is a contributing writer at The Atlantic *and the author of* Thin Places: Essays From In Between.

The Origin Revisited
By Ada Limón

— After a visit to the Yaak Valley in Kootenai National Forest, Montana, where the U.S. Forest Service has announced a logging project called Black Ram

What is there to be done now, but enter
against abandonment, become a hollow sound

in the halo of labyrinthine green, become a crossed-
out word on the back of someone's hand.

Once, all of this became

all of this. One not-yet-golden western larch
curves by a white pine, a white pine

curves by a western hemlock, no one here
is heroic. To enter here is to enter

magnitude, to feel an ecstatic somethingness,
a nothingness of your own name.

All words become wrong. A whole world exists
without us. But who is us?

Lichen, moss, grizzly scat, moose hoofprint like two
exclamation points by the drying frog pond.

How do you know you're alive? What evidence
will you leave? So many myths

are unraveling; a yellow swallowtail glides by over
the sinless creek bed. A storm

wets the skin and we are surprised we have
skin. Woods' rose, white-flowered rhododendron,

nothing here is unfinished. What it gave me? I saw
a new tree emerge out of a ground made of ancient trees

on top of more ancient trees, on top of more ancient trees,
on top of more ancient trees, and understood then

that this was how the Earth was made.

Ada Limón is the author of six books of poetry, including The Carrying, *which won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry. Her most recent book is* The Hurting Kind. *She is the 24th Poet Laureate of the United States.*


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BOOKS

The Other Naomi

A left-wing author finds herself constantly confused with a right-wing conspiracist.

By Helen Lewis



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In 2019, a mnemonic began to circulate on the internet: "If the Naomi be Klein / you're doing just fine / If the Naomi be Wolf / Oh, buddy. Ooooof." The rhyme recognized one of the most puzzling intellectual journeys of recent times—Naomi Wolf's descent into conspiracism—and the collateral damage it was inflicting on the Canadian climate activist and anti-capitalist Naomi Klein.

Until recently, Naomi Wolf was best known for her 1990s feminist blockbuster *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*, which argued that the tyranny of grooming standards—all that plucking and waxing—was a form of backlash against women's rights. But she is now one of America's most prolific conspiracy theorists, boasting on her Twitter profile of being "deplatformed 7 times and still right." She has claimed that vaccines are a "software platform" that can "receive 'uploads'" and is mildly obsessed with the idea that many clouds aren't real, but are instead evidence of "geoengineered skies." Although Wolf has largely disappeared from the mainstream media, she is now a favored guest on Steve Bannon's podcast, *War Room*.

All of this is particularly bad news for Klein, for the simple reason that people keep mistaking the two women for each other. Back in 2011, when she first noticed the confusion—from inside a bathroom stall, she heard two women complain that "Naomi Klein" didn't understand the demands of the Occupy movement—this was merely embarrassing. The movement sprang from Klein's part of the left, and in October of that year she was invited to speak to Occupy New York. Was it their shared first name, their Jewishness, or their brown hair with blond highlights? Even their partners' names were similar: Avram Lewis and Avram Ludwig. Klein was struck that both had experienced rejection from their peer groups (in her case, by fellow students when she first criticized Israel in the college newspaper).

Klein had once admired *The Beauty Myth*, but she realized to her horror that Wolf had drifted from feminist criticism to broader social polemics. When she picked up Wolf's 2007 book, *The End of America: Letter of Warning to a Young Patriot*, her

own book, out the same year, came to mind. "I felt like I was reading a parody of *The Shock Doctrine*, one with all the facts and evidence carefully removed." To Klein, the situation began to seem sinister, even threatening. She was being eaten alive. "Other Naomi—that is how I refer to her now," Klein writes at the beginning of her new book, *Doppelganger: A Trip Into the Mirror World*. "A person whom so many others appear to find indistinguishable from me. A person who does many extreme things that cause strangers to chastise me or thank me or express their pity for me."

The confusion was particularly galling because *No Logo* (1999), Klein's breakout work, was a manifesto against branding. And yet here she was, feeling an urgent need to protect her own personal brand from this interloper. Klein asserts that she didn't want to write *Doppelganger*—"not with the literal and metaphorical fires roiling our planet," she confesses with a hint of pomposity—but found herself ever more obsessed by Wolf's conspiracist turn. How do you go from liberal darling to *War Room* regular within a decade?

Like Klein, I loved *The Beauty Myth* as a young woman, and then largely forgot about Wolf until 2010, when Julian Assange was arrested for alleged sex offenses (the charges were later dropped), and she claimed that Interpol was acting as "the world's dating police." Two years later, she published *Vagina: A New Biography*, which mixed sober accounts of rape as a weapon of war with a quest to cure her midlife sexual dysfunction through "yoni massages" and activating "the Goddess array." In one truly deranged scene, a friend hosts a party at his loft and serves pasta shaped like vulvae, alongside salmon and sausages. The violent intermingling of genital-coded food overwhelms Wolf, who experiences it as an insult to womanhood in general and her own vagina in particular, and suffers writer's block for the next six months. (I suspect that the friend was just trying to get into the spirit of Wolf's writing project.) I remember beginning to wonder around this time whether Wolf might be a natural conspiracy theorist who had merely lucked into writing about one conspiracy—the patriarchy—that happened to be true.

I began to wonder whether Wolf might be a natural conspiracy theorist who had merely lucked into writing about one conspiracy, the patriarchy, that happened to be true.

Her final exile from the mainstream can probably be dated to 2019, when she was humiliated in a live radio interview during the rollout of her book *Outrages: Sex, Censorship, and the Criminalization of Love*. She had claimed that gay men in Victorian England were regularly executed for sodomy, but the BBC host Matthew Sweet noted that the phrase *death recorded* in the archives meant that the sentence had been commuted, rather than carried out. It was a grade A howler, and it marked open season on her for all previous offenses against evidence and logical consistency. The *New York Times* review of *Outrages* referred to "Naomi Wolf's long, ludicrous career." In the U.K., the publisher promised changes to future editions, and the release of the U.S. edition was canceled outright.

Klein dwells on this incident in *Doppelganger*, and rightly so: "If you want an origin story, an event when Wolf's future flip to the pseudo-populist right was locked in, it was probably that moment, live on the BBC, getting caught—and then getting shamed, getting mocked, and getting pulped." If the intelligentsia wouldn't lionize Wolf, then the Bannonite right would: She could enter a world where mistakes don't matter, no one feels shame, and fact-checkers are derided as finger-wagging elitists.

"These people don't disappear just because we can no longer see them," Klein reminds any fellow leftists who might be enthusiastic about public humiliation as a weapon against the right. Denied access to the mainstream media, the ostracized will be welcomed on One America News Network and Newsmax, or social-media sites such as Rumble, Gettr, Gab, Truth Social, and Elon Musk's new all-crazy-all-the-time reincarnation of Twitter as X. On podcasts, the entire heterodox space revels in "just asking questions"—and then not caring about the peer-reviewed answers. By escaping to what Klein calls the "Mirror World," Wolf might have lost cultural capital, but she has not lost an audience.

Klein notes that this world is particularly hospitable to those who can blend personal and social grievances into an appealing populist message—*I am despised by the pointy-heads, just as you are*. She ventures "a kind of equation for leftists and liberals crossing over to the authoritarian right that goes something like this: Narcissism (Grandiosity) + Social media addiction + Midlife crisis ÷ Public shaming = Right wing meltdown." She is inclined to downplay "that bit of math," though, and feels uncomfortable putting Wolf on the couch. Nonetheless, I'm struck by how narcissism (in the ubiquitous lay sense of the term) is key to understanding conspiracy-theorist influencers and their followers. If you feel disrespected and overlooked in everyday life, then being flattered with the idea that you're a special person with secret knowledge must be appealing.

KLEIN'S REAL INTEREST, as you might expect from her previous work, tends more toward sociology than psychology. Her doppelgänger isn't an opportunist or a con artist, Klein decides, but a genuine believer—even if those beliefs have the happy side effect of garnering her attention and praise. But what about the culture that has enabled her to thrive?

> At first, I thought what I was seeing in my doppelganger's world was mostly grifting unbound. Over time, though, I started to get the distinct impression that I was also witnessing a new and dangerous political formation find itself in real time: its

alliances, worldview, slogans, enemies, code words, and no-go zones—and, most of all, its ground game for taking power.

To explore this ambitious agenda, the book ranges widely and sometimes tangentially. At one point, Klein finds herself listening to hours of *War Room*, hosted by a man who has built a dark empire of profitable half-truths. Why does Klein find Bannon so compelling? Here *Doppelganger* takes a startling turn. The answer is that, quite simply, game recognizes game. Klein's cohort on the left attacks Big Pharma profits, worries about "surveillance capitalism," and sees Davos and the G7 as a cozy cabal exploiting the poor. Understandably, she hears Other Naomi talk with Bannon about vaccine manufacturers' profits, rail against Big Tech's power to control us, and make the case that Klaus Schwab of the World Economic Forum has untold secret power, and she can't help noting some underlying similarities. When Bannon criticizes MSNBC and CNN for running shows sponsored by Pfizer, telling his audience that this is evidence of rule "by the wealthy, for the wealthy, against you," Klein writes, "it strikes me that he sounds like Noam Chomsky. Or Chris Smalls, the Amazon Labor Union leader known for his EAT THE RICH jacket. Or, for that matter, me."

This is *Doppelganger* at its best, acknowledging the traits that make us all susceptible to manipulation. In a 2008 *New Yorker* profile of Klein, her husband described her as a "pattern recognizer," adding: "Some people feel that she's bent examples to fit the thesis. But her great strength is helping people recognize patterns in the world, because that's the fundamental first step toward changing things." Of course, overactive pattern recognition is also the essence of conspiracism, and a decade and a half later, Klein expresses more caution about her superpower. When 9/11 truthers turn up at her events—drawn perhaps by her criticism in *The Shock Doctrine* of George W. Bush's response to the tragedy—their presence leads her to conclude "that the line between unsupported conspiracy claims and reliable investigative research is neither as firm nor as stable as many of us would like to believe."

We live in a world where the U.S. government has done outlandish stuff: The Tuskegee experiment, MK-Ultra, Iran-Contra, and Watergate are all conspiracies that diligent journalism proved to be true. QAnon's visions of Hollywood child-sex rings might be a mirage, but the Catholic Church's abuse of children in Boston was all too real—and uncovering it won *The Boston Globe* a Pulitzer Prize. Klein worries about whether a political movement can generate mass appeal without resorting to populism, and about how to stop her criticisms of elite power from being co-opted by her opponents and distorted into attacks on the marginalized.

DOPPELGANGER: A TRIP INTO THE MIRROR WORLD

Naomi Klein

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

However, Klein's (correct) diagnosis of American conspiracism as a primarily right-wing pathology prevents her from fully acknowledging the degree to which it has sometimes infected her own allies and idols. In *Doppelganger*, Klein notes that anti-Semitism has served as "the socialism of fools"—stirred up to deflect popular anger away from the elite—but she does not discuss the anti-Jewish bigotry in the British Labour Party under its former leader Jeremy Corbyn, whom she endorsed in the 2019 election. (Corbyn once praised a mural of hook-nosed bankers counting money on a table held up by Black people, and his supporters suggested that his critics were Israeli stooges.) The party has since apologized for not taking anti-Semitism seriously enough.

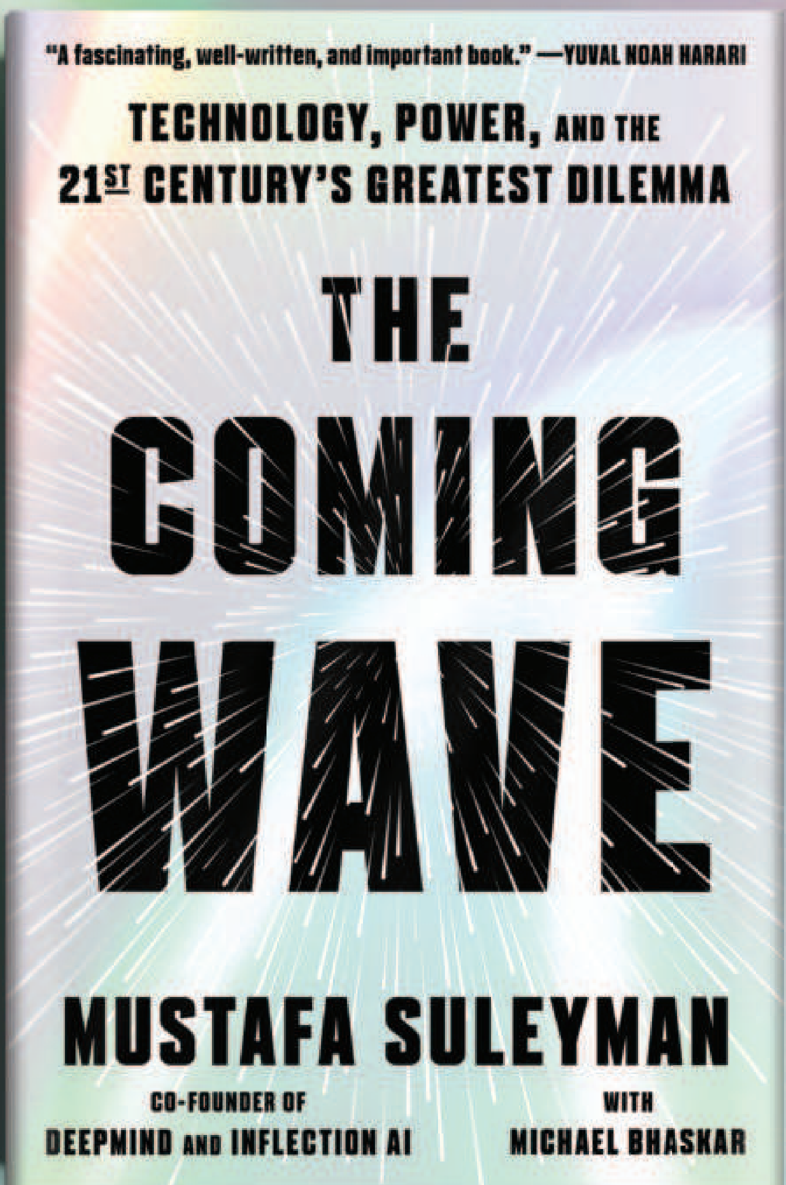
AT TIMES, this can be a frustrating book. Near the end, Klein says she requested an interview with Wolf, promising that it would be "a respectful debate" about their political disagreements. She also hoped to remind Wolf of their original meeting, more than three decades earlier—when Wolf, then 28, captivated the 20-year-old Klein, showing her the possibilities of what a female author could be. But Wolf never responded to the request, and the doppelgängers have not met face-to-face since then.

Still, Klein emerges with a sense of resolution. She writes that the confusion between the two of them has lately died down, now that Other Naomi has become an "unmistakable phenomenon unto herself." Even better, the situation has introduced "a hefty dose of ridiculousness into the seriousness with which I once took my public persona." Not that the zealous Klein has disappeared: The next few pages are a paean to collective organizing, worker solidarity, and "cities in the grips of revolutionary fervor."

Doppelganger is least interesting when Klein returns to her comfort zone, but her brutally honest forays into self-examination are fascinating. The book is also a welcome antidote to the canceling reflex of our moment and a bracing venture across ideological lines. Klein successfully makes the case that the American left is more tethered to reality than the right—not because it is composed of smarter or better people, but because it has not lost touch with the mechanisms, such as scientific peer review and media pluralism, that act as a check on our worst instincts. Exposed to many of the same forces as her conspiracist doppelgänger—fame, cancellation, trauma, COVID isolation—this Naomi stayed fine. That has to offer us some hope. *A*

Helen Lewis is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

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BOOKS

Life After "I Do"

George Eliot's subversive vision of marriage

By Ann Hulbert

"Marriage is so unlike everything else. There is something even awful in the nearness it brings." George Eliot wrote those sentences in her 1872 masterpiece, *Middlemarch*, an examination of marriage unmatched by any other. She scrutinized the relationship—its intimate secrets and its public contours—with rare imaginative and moral intensity in her other fiction too. But that fearsome declaration, uttered by her protagonist Dorothea Brooke, stands out. It was meant to disorient a reader, and still does.

It definitely sounds un-Victorian, framing marriage as the antithesis of a demurely conventional arrangement. Does it sound contemporary? The shudder at suffocation might seem familiar—*I need some space*. That "awful," though, isn't just a way of saying *dreadful*; it surely also means awe-inspiring, which delivers a jolt. Americans may marvel at the romantic spectacle of lavish weddings and wonder at the

ILLUSTRATION BY MIKI LOWE



endurance of an institution that has weathered so many rounds of criticism, calls for redefinition, and diagnoses of crisis. But we appear to be more wary than awed. A quarter of 40-year-olds in the United States (where the surgeon general recently issued an advisory on "our epidemic of loneliness and isolation") have never been married—a new milestone. Who knows whether they'll change their mind. To those holdouts—as well as the rest of us—Eliot's sentences say: Don't take marriage at face value or assume you understand it.

Eliot's own marital trajectory was anomalous, and not just by the standards of her time.

Eliot's own marital trajectory was anomalous, and not just by the standards of her time. Marian Evans, as she was known when she arrived in London from the Midlands in 1851 to help edit the liberal journal *The Westminster Review*, had long despaired that "the bliss of reciprocated affection" was out of reach for the homely, brooding misfit she felt she was. In 1854, soon to turn 35, she eloped to live with a married man, and became a social pariah. Evans called him her "beloved husband," and George Henry Lewes—editor, biographer, philosopher, critic, scientific writer—called her the "best of Wives," though he never divorced the legal wife with whom he had three children. Evans credited their "blessed union," and "the happiness which his love has conferred on my life," with allowing her to discover "my true vocation, after which my nature had always been feeling and striving uneasily without finding it." George Eliot was born.

By the time Lewes died, in 1878, Eliot was renowned (thanks in part to his promotional efforts) as a novelist-oracle dispensing wisdom to anchor humanity in a godless cosmos. A year and a half later, now 60, she took the surprising step, in an era when many frowned on second marriages, of getting legally married at last—to a friend and devoted admirer two decades her junior, John Cross. She was dead within eight months. Cross spent the next four years editing and arranging her letters and journals into the pious "autobiography" of a sententious paragon. Scrubbed of all traces of humor and pointed opinion, it was designed, as the Eliot scholar and biographer Gordon S. Haight put it, "to perpetuate the fame of the Victorian Sibyl." A more subversive Eliot has been struggling to get out ever since.

FOR SEVERAL DECADES, Eliot has been enlisted as a guide in women's quest for fulfillment in love and work. The biographer and critic Phyllis Rose, in her now-classic *Parallel Lives: Five Victorian Marriages* (1983), pronounced Eliot and Lewes "my favorite couple." Her Eliot, dovetailing with second-wave feminism, knew what she wanted and secured it with Lewes: a partner dedicated to loving her, reading and talking constantly with her, writing alongside her, and excelling as the ultimate helpmeet and literary agent. For women critics a generation after Rose, Eliot has supplied quieter encouragement on their paths to emotional and vocational maturity. A decade ago, the *New Yorker* writer Rebecca Mead, in her memoir *My Life in Middlemarch*, wrote of returning again and again to the novel, valuing Eliot's vision of the ongoing growth of a soul. The writer and *Harper's* editor Joanna Biggs takes a similar personal approach in *A Life of One's Own: Nine Women Writers Begin Again*, out this past spring. She is especially heartened, in the aftermath of her early divorce, by Eliot's rebirth in her mid-30s.

A more unnerving Eliot, drawn to the sometimes-terrifying but also transformative depths of marriage, emerges in a fascinating new biography, *The Marriage Question: George Eliot's Double Life*, by Clare Carlisle, a philosophy professor at King's College London. As her title suggests, Carlisle approaches Eliot's life and art as a quest to go beyond the most entrenched of marriage plots: the courtship-centered drama, with its happily-ever-after closure, that Jane Austen mastered

and that has indelibly marked not just literature but life. For Eliot, "marriage, which has been the bourne of so many narratives," became a beginning—one in theory without an end, other than death.

Eliot and Lewes read Austen together early in a relationship that hardly fit the comic Austen script. Eliot had just been spurned by the philosopher Herbert Spencer, with whom she had fallen in love ("The lack of physical attraction was fatal," he later said). Before that, she had been briefly entangled with *The Westminster Review*'s young publisher, who already had a wife and a mistress. Lewes, for his part, was in a nonmonogamous marriage that wasn't going well: His wife also had two children by his best friend, and soon she was pregnant with another. In an 1852 essay for the *Review* titled "The Lady Novelists," which Eliot assigned and edited, Lewes extolled Austen's "exquisite art" and called her world "a perfect orb, and vital." But he also observed that "there are heights and depths in human nature Miss Austen has never scaled nor fathomed, there are worlds of passionate existence into which she has never set foot."

Four years later, Eliot was poised to give fiction a try, now settled into her "double life, which helps me to feel and think with double strength." (The pressure was on: In deciding to unite, she and Lewes vowed to support his lawful wife and her many children.) Surveying "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," Eliot the critic especially derided the vogue of "oracular" gibberish, fiction that waded into theories of right and wrong, offering pat Christian solutions. Her ideal woman novelist "does not write books to confound philosophers, perhaps because she is able to write books that delight them." Fortified by Lewes's faith in her gifts, she was mustering courage to aspire to such a goal.

INDEED, CARLISLE credits Eliot with "creating a new philosophical voice" in her fiction as she feels and thinks her way into the most intimate of relationships. Carlisle is an empathetic and ambitious interpreter. She delves beneath the surface of marriage in Eliot's novels, finding a world that hums with big questions—about "desire, freedom, selfhood, change, morality, happiness, belief, the mystery of other minds."

Eliot's genius lay in her acute awareness of how little we reveal to others about what churns inside our heads and hearts—and how little we may perceive about ourselves. As she wrote in her last novel, *Daniel Deronda* (1876), "There is a great deal of unmapped country within us which would have to be taken into account in an explanation of our gusts and storms." "It was she," D. H. Lawrence said, "who started putting all the action inside."

Carlisle calls attention to just how much of that action in Eliot's novels transpires in "very dark marital interiors ... with their recurring scenes of ambivalence, brutality and disappointment." The best-known entrant into that shadowed place is vibrantly idealistic Dorothea in *Middlemarch*, who misjudges pedantic Edward Casaubon so wildly and marries him so quickly. She is devastated to discover his shrunken heart, and instead of "large vistas" in his mind, "winding passages which seemed to lead nowhither." For other protagonists, "wifely relations" entail a more violent, pathological struggle. Janet Dempster is beaten by her drunken husband and driven to drink herself in Eliot's debut, *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857). In *Daniel Deronda*, headstrong Gwendolen Harleth is soon haunted by murder fantasies about the cold tyrant, Henleigh Grandcourt, she felt compelled to marry: "That white hand of his which was touching his whisker was capable, she fancied, of clinging round her neck and threatening to throttle her." She is in turn appalled by her own murderous wish: "My heart said, 'Die!'—and he sank."

The contrast between the private agonies of Eliot's couples and their public displays of composure is striking: Out of pride, they suppress signs of misery at the isolation and subjection that ambush them. The contrast between her characters' hidden suffering and Eliot's own radiant marital interior is even starker. In her letters and journal entries, she was effusive in her gratitude for "a life of perfect love and a union that every year makes closer." She evoked a haven of "thorough moral and intellectual sympathy," and marveled at "my warm, enthusiastic husband, who cares more for my doing than for his own."

Pride surely was at work for Eliot too: She chose to flout Church and state, which meant going for years without social invitations, rarely receiving visitors, and being cut off by her brother. She had a stake in saying to anyone who would listen—and in proving to herself and Lewes—that the two of them prized their marriage as a "sacred bond," legal or not. Why risk embarking openly, as a woman in Britain, on an illicit relationship unless the reward was a loving fidelity, and rare marital equality, that brought "the deepest and gravest joy in all human experience"?

Still, memories of turmoil and loneliness shadowed the idyllic portrayals of what clearly was an exceptional union: a combination of "turbulent, self-critical sensitivity and steady cheerful good sense," as Carlisle sums up the Eliot-Lewes pairing—plus hard-driving ambition on both sides. Eliot "had not chosen to remain alone for so long," Carlisle emphasizes, "but all those years without a husband produced a more varied experience of her own heart than most women gained before they married"—and a haunting recognition of how differently things could have gone. Her happiness, after what she referred to as "the long sad years of youth," was so unexpected, and she had found

THE MARRIAGE QUESTION: GEORGE ELIOT'S DOUBLE LIFE

Clare Carlisle

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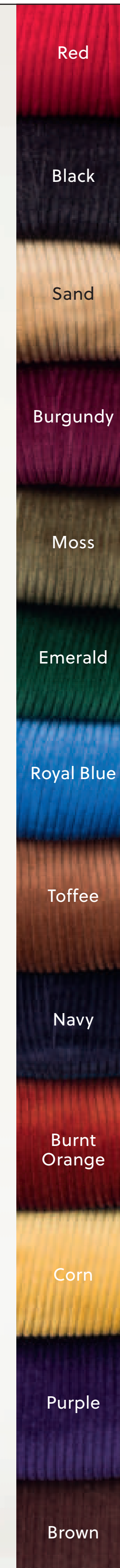
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it in a marriage that ought not to have been possible. In Lewes's company, Eliot could dare imagine that "all the terrible pain I have gone through in past years has probably been a preparation for some special work that I may do before I die."

ELIOT'S SPECIAL WORK lay in giving her characters marital struggles that occasion a "questioning of self and destiny"—something she believed happened too rarely in women's lives. She resisted simply doling out the tidy fates prescribed for unhappy couples in the conventional Victorian novel's wedlock plot: spouses wisely reawakened to romantic love (the comic version) or else sundered, having transgressed accepted standards of wifely subservience or master-of-the-house dominance (the tragic version). Eliot wasn't interested in confirming the prevailing ideal of marriage as a patriarchal, insular bulwark in a troubled world.

She focused instead on inner transformation and growth through the experience of crisis in those desolate marital interiors. Carlisle usefully highlights Eliot's idea of the "imagined 'otherwise'" as a key to her understanding of how a mind thinks, how a self can be opened to change. By that phrase, as Eliot explains it in *Middlemarch*, she means the universal human habit of conjuring up alternative possibilities along life's path—"what if?" visions about the past and future that swirl with mistaken choices, missed chances, suppressed desires.

Eliot has a way of leaving her women characters with their souls expanded, yet somehow chastened. You would not, in other words, mistake them for Jane Austen characters.

Eliot understands marriage as a ready incubator of that sort of imagining: It is such a far-reaching commitment, inadequately prepared for by courtship and inevitably subject to unforeseen flux and stress. How could its daily reality—two partners in constant proximity, with competing needs and expectations—not sometimes fuel fantasies of other prospects, both threatening and alluring? Yet escapism isn't what Eliot has in mind.

In *Middlemarch*, she distributes the what-if impulse generously. Her readers are invited to contemplate destinies for her various couples other than the ones that play out: What if, we wonder, Dorothea had not already been engaged to Casaubon when Tertius Lydgate, the idealistic young doctor who looks like a perfect match for her, arrived in town? Or what if Will Ladislaw, Casaubon's artistic young cousin with "bushy light-brown curls" but "no property, and not well-born," had won her heart right away? These other fates glimmer like mirages while couples stumble through "pain and weakness and sheer limitation," as Carlisle writes, and the "unmapped country" within acquires new markers.

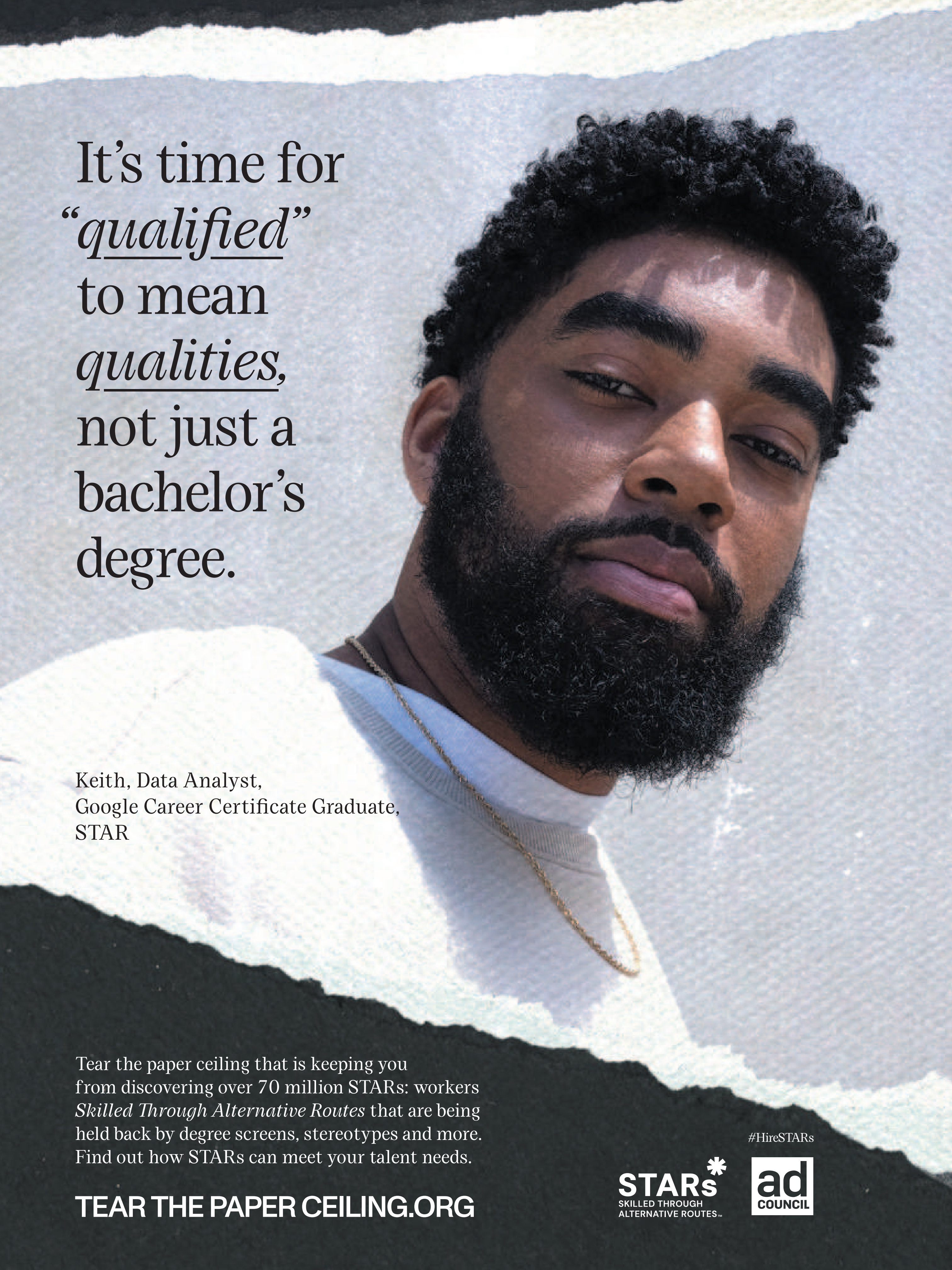
Dorothea and Ladislaw unite in the end (after Casaubon's death), more maturely compassionate for having endured psychic turmoil. Even so, the match stirs comment. In the novel's finale, the narrator records Dorothea's friends lamenting that so "rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another, and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother." But Eliot telegraphs the error of such a verdict. Dorothea never becomes a wife who feels eclipsed, nor are the Ladislaws what we now call "smug marrieds," their backs turned to the world. Dorothea, devoted at home, is also quietly but ardently joined with Will, who has been elected to Parliament, in the uphill pursuit of social reform.

Daniel Deronda leaves Gwendolen Harleth facing a far more disconcerting prospect. Unromantic and willful, she resists getting tied down by marriage and at first spurns Grandcourt's proposal. ("I wonder how girls manage to fall in love," she says. "It is easy to make them do it in books. But men are too ridiculous.") Yet sudden family financial troubles change her calculus. She tells herself that at least the supremely aloof Grandcourt won't crowd her—only to find that she is his captive.

She turns in desperation to Daniel Deronda, a man who possesses "perhaps more than a woman's acuteness of compassion," and an imagined otherwise—a sense of much-needed intimacy—starts to take shape in her consciousness. But no rescue awaits, even after Grandcourt abruptly drowns. She learns in the novel's final pages that Deronda plans to marry someone else and go in quest of a Jewish homeland. Though strengthened by his prediction that she "may live to be one of the best of women," she has no idea "how that can be." Gwendolen is alone, "dislodged from her supremacy in her own world" for the first time.

Eliot never aimed to set forth a philosophy of marriage. In her art, she found room for a many-layered, tension-infused conception of it that can feel at once capacious and stifling, daring and intimidating—marriage as a suspenseful adventure and an arduous endeavor. She has a way of leaving her characters, her women especially, with their souls expanded, yet seeming somehow chastened. You would not, in other words, mistake them for Jane Austen characters. Austen's comic ideal is of "spirited, rights-holding individuals living in social concord," as the Columbia professor and critic Nicholas Dames has written; her women—left on the threshold of marriage—thrive and take joy in "the very idea of having a self." Eliot's protagonists flourish differently. Their youthful defiance and assertive independence may ebb, but they have been jolted into seeing beyond their own needs, desires, and delusions—into recognizing an "equivalent centre of self" in another person. Marriage, in Eliot's pages, unfolds as a challenge unlike anything else. 𝒜

Ann Hulbert is the literary editor of The Atlantic.


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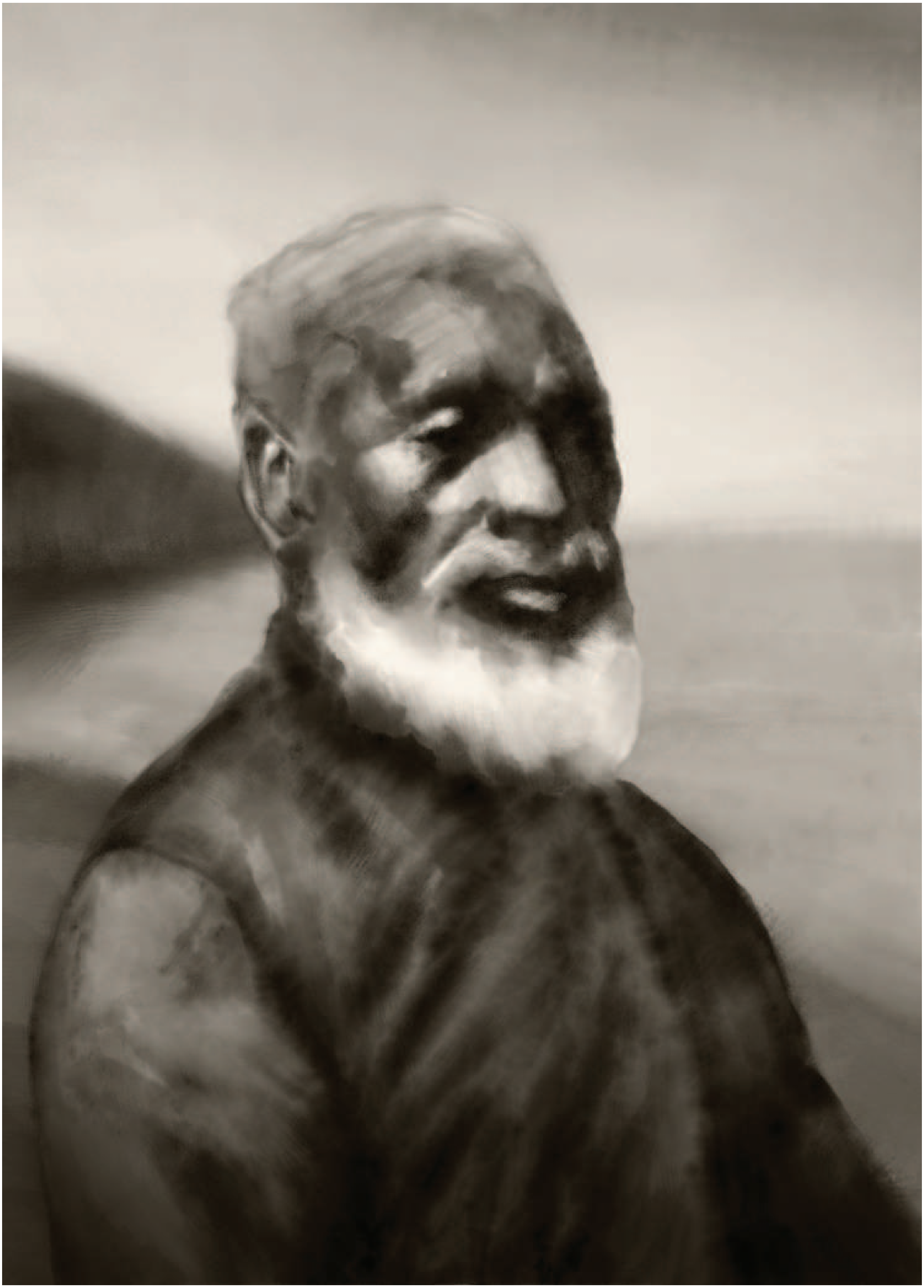
ESSAY

The Man Who Became Uncle Tom

Harriet Beecher Stowe said that Josiah Henson's life had inspired her most famous character. But Henson longed to be recognized by his own name, and for his own achievements.

By
Clint
Smith

"Among all the singular and interesting records to which the institution of American slavery has given rise," Harriet Beecher Stowe once wrote, "we know of none more striking, more characteristic and instructive, than that of JOSIAH HENSON." ¶ Stowe first wrote about Henson's 1849 autobiography in her 1853 book *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, an annotated bibliography of sorts in which she cited a



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number of nonfiction accounts she had used as source material for her best-selling novel. Stowe later said that Henson's narrative had served as an inspiration for Uncle Tom.

Proslavery newspaper columnists and southern planters had responded to the huge success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by accusing Stowe of hyperbole and outright falsehood. Benevolent masters, they said, took great care of the enslaved people who worked for them; in some cases, they treated them like family. The violent, inhumane conditions Stowe described, they contended, were fictitious. By naming her sources, and outlining how they had influenced her story, Stowe hoped to prove that her novel was rooted in fact.

A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin was an immediate success; its publisher reported selling 90,000 copies by the end of 1854. Abraham Lincoln himself may have read the book, at a crucial turning point in the Civil War: Records indicate that the 16th president checked it out from the Library of Congress on June 16, 1862, and returned it on July 29. Those 43 days correspond with the period during which Lincoln drafted the Emancipation Proclamation.

Who was Josiah Henson? Born in 1789, according to his autobiography, he was enslaved in Maryland and Kentucky and served as an overseer before escaping to Canada in 1830. By 1862, when Lincoln checked out the *Key*, Henson had helped found a 200-acre settlement in Ontario, known as Dawn, which provided a refuge for hundreds of free Black people who had fled bondage in America. He had also made numerous return trips to the American South to help guide enslaved people to freedom. In total, Henson said, he freed 118 people; by comparison, Harriet Tubman is believed to have freed about 70.

I first learned about Henson's remarkable life a year or so ago, as I was doing research for a different story. I wondered why I hadn't heard of him sooner. He was one of the first Black people to be an exhibitor at a World's Fair. He met with President Rutherford B. Hayes and Queen Victoria. He built businesses that gave Black fugitives a livelihood after years of exploitation. Why weren't American students being taught about Henson when they learned about Tubman, or assigned his autobiography alongside Frederick Douglass's?

One reason might be that Henson chose, after escaping the United States at age 41, to spend the rest of his life in Canada, the country that gave him his freedom and full citizenship. And perhaps educators have been reluctant to spend too much time on a man known as "the original Uncle Tom" when that term has become a virulent insult.

But Henson was not Uncle Tom. Despite being forever linked with the fictional character after Stowe revealed him as a source of inspiration, he longed to be recognized by his own name, and for his own achievements. And he publicly wrestled with the role he had played, as an overseer, in abetting slavery's violence and cruelty.

Why weren't American students being taught about Henson when they learned about Harriet Tubman, or assigned his autobiography alongside Frederick Douglass's?

Henson's biography and legacy, I came to see, defy easy categorization. His is not a linear story of triumph over hardship. Rather, it is a story that reflects the complexity and moral incongruence that animated the lives of enslavers and shaped the lives of the enslaved. It is a story of how a man who was at once a victim and a perpetuator of slavery's evils tried, and failed, and hoped, and evolved, and regretted, and mourned, and tried again. It is a story that reveals the impossibility of being a moral person in a fundamentally immoral system.

"***UNCLE TOM'S CABIN*** is a very bad novel," James Baldwin wrote in his 1949 essay "Everybody's Protest Novel." Published when Baldwin was just 24 years old, the essay helped establish the young writer as one of America's fiercest social critics. Baldwin writes that Stowe's book was gratuitous, overly sentimental, and two-dimensional, "not intended to do anything more than prove that slavery was wrong." He concludes: "This makes material for a pamphlet but it is hardly enough for a novel."

In many ways, the book did serve as a pamphlet; abolitionists saw it as a means for laying bare the horrors of slavery to white northerners. (Supporters of slavery saw it as a threat. One minister in Maryland was arrested and imprisoned for owning a copy, along with other abolitionist literature.) *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is said to have been, aside from the Bible, the best-selling book of the 19th century. Originally serialized in a newspaper, *The National Era*, over the course of 44 weeks, the complete book was published in March 1852. It sold an estimated 300,000 copies in the U.S., and more than 2 million worldwide, in its first year.

Uncle Tom's Cabin is indeed, as Baldwin suggests, filled with stereotypes. "In order to appreciate the sufferings of the negroes sold south, it must be remembered that all the instinctive affections of that race are peculiarly strong," Stowe writes. "Their local attachments are very abiding. They are not naturally daring and enterprising, but home-loving and affectionate." When describing the songs enslaved people sang together, Stowe explains that "the negro mind, impassioned and imaginative, always attaches itself to hymns and expressions of a vivid and pictorial nature."

The scholar Jim O'Loughlin, who has written extensively about the literary and cultural implications of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, refers to Stowe's posture as one of "romantic racialism." Even when the writer is ostensibly celebrating or sympathizing with Black

characters, O'Loughlin told me, she posits an essentialist view of them.

Worse, Stowe's Black characters venerate whiteness and disparage themselves. "Now, Missis, do jist look at dem beautiful white hands o' yourn, with long fingers, and all a sparkling with rings, like my white lilies when de dew's on 'em," Aunt Chloe, an enslaved woman, says to her white mistress. "And look at my great black stumpin hands. Now, don't ye think dat de Lord must have meant *me* to make de pie-crust, and you to stay in de parlor?" As Baldwin puts it: "Here, black equates with evil and white with grace."

Still, when I read it recently, sections of the book took me by surprise. My understanding of Uncle Tom, I came to see, had been informed less by the character in the book than by the distortions of the character that followed in the succeeding decades, when he came to be known as a lackey and a traitor. The Tom of the novel, while not as fully realized as some of Stowe's white characters, was kind, thoughtful, and brave—a tragic hero who sacrifices his own life rather than give up information about where two enslaved Black women are hiding. This was not the Tom I thought I knew.

I was also fascinated by some of the exchanges between the white characters on the morality of slavery, as exemplified by a conversation between Miss Ophelia and her cousin Augustine St. Clare. Miss Ophelia, a white woman from the North who has come to stay with the slave-owning St. Clare and his family down South, doesn't understand how her cousin—who she believes to be a kind, good-hearted man—can participate in such an egregious institution.

> "I say it's perfectly abominable for you to defend such a system!" said Miss Ophelia, with increasing warmth.
>
> "*I* defend it, my dear lady? Who ever said I did defend it?" said St. Clare.
>
> "Of course, you defend it,—you all do,—all you Southerners. What do you have slaves for, if you don't?"
>
> "Are you such a sweet innocent as to suppose nobody in this world ever does what they don't think is right? Don't you, or didn't you ever, do anything that you did not think quite right?"
>
> "If I do, I repent of it, I hope," said Miss Ophelia, rattling her needles with energy.
>
> "So do I," said St. Clare, peeling his orange; "I'm repenting of it all the time."

The exchange is perhaps the most human and morally complex in the novel. It serves as a reminder to contemporary readers that slavery was not perpetuated simply by malevolent caricatures of evil, but also by ordinary people who suspected that slavery was wrong yet were unwilling to surrender the social and economic benefits it brought to their life.

In his 1849 autobiography and in subsequent editions of the book, Josiah Henson similarly contended with the fact that he'd been both a victim and an instrument of the institution's brutality. As a teenager, he'd craved his master's approval. "One word of commendation from the petty despot who ruled over us would set me up for a month," Henson reflected. "My pride and ambition had made me master of every kind of farmwork." (All of the quotes I am using are drawn from the 1881 edition of the book, generally considered the most complete version.) He soon became an overseer, attempting to cultivate both the trust of his enslaver and the respect of his fellow enslaved workers.

In 1825, when Henson was 35 and married with two children, his enslaver, Isaac Riley, came into his cabin with a request. Riley was in serious financial trouble; he told Henson that a court was threatening to liquidate his assets, including his enslaved workers. "They've got judgment against me," Riley said, "and in less than two weeks every nigger I've got will be put up and sold."

Rather than sell his property, Riley decided to hide it from the authorities, and enlisted Henson to help him. He told Henson he needed him to take 21 enslaved people from his plantation in Maryland to his brother's plantation in Kentucky: a 700-mile journey.

Henson had never been outside the Washington, D.C., area, and the notion of the trip was daunting. But the alternative was devastating in its own right. He remembered watching his mother being separated from five of her six children at an auction when he was a boy. He could still recall the indelible image of his father being tortured for a transgression against a white overseer. His father's ear had been severed from his head before he was ultimately sold down South. For Henson, the prospect of being separated from his own wife and children, or being even partly responsible for other family separations, was too painful to consider. He told Riley that he would go to Kentucky.

Henson's mother stayed behind. This was perhaps a way of discouraging Henson from trying to escape after leaving the plantation—even if he was not caught, his mother could be punished in his stead, a common tactic among enslavers.

On a cold night in February, Henson led the group away from the plantation, with a travel pass provided by Riley in hand. Children rode in a horse-drawn wagon. Adults walked. When they reached the Ohio River, Henson sold the horse and wagon for a boat, and he and his charges began making their way down the river.

In Cincinnati, they encountered a group of free Black people who told them they should stay in Ohio instead of continuing on to Kentucky. Ohio was a free state; Henson and his traveling companions could make a new life—a free life. "They told us we were fools to think of going on and surrendering ourselves up to a new owner," Henson recounted in his autobiography, "that now we could be our own masters, and put ourselves out of all reach of pursuit." The possibility was tantalizing. But as much as he desired freedom, he had never imagined that escape would be the means by which he gained it.

Henson was a preacher on the Riley plantation, and his hesitancy stemmed in part from his religious conviction. "The duties of the slave to his master as appointed over him in the Lord, I had ever heard urged by ministers and religious men," Henson said. Believing that God wanted him to be a man of his word, Henson told the other enslaved people in his party to get back on the boat—he had made a promise to bring them to Kentucky.

In *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe, a devout Christian herself, wrote about how this decision was part of what had inspired her to draw on Henson's story for her novel:

> Those casuists among us who lately seem to think and teach that it is right for us to violate the plain commands of God, whenever some great national good can be secured by it, would do well to contemplate the inflexible principle of this poor slave, who, without being able to read a letter of the Bible, was yet enabled to perform this most sublime act of self-renunciation in obedience to its commands.

Henson was so committed to what he understood as the will of the lord that he sacrificed his own freedom—in a sense, his own life—to follow it. How many people, Stowe contemplates, would have done the same in his position?

I take issue with Stowe's assertion; I find it impossible to disentangle what motivated Henson's decision from its outcome. I cannot admire his devotion to God without confronting how his understanding of God's will had been manipulated by enslavers. I cannot admire the fidelity behind his choice without confronting its insidious implications.

As I read the scene in Henson's autobiography, I thought about the way in which Black people were routinely conscripted to enact the violence of slavery upon one another even as they experienced it themselves. To be enslaved, Henson understood, was to be constantly presented with a series of impossible choices, never knowing whether you'd made the right one. (Had he remained in Ohio, would his mother, still living on Riley's Maryland plantation, have suffered the consequences?) Henson later described his regret over this fateful decision:

> Often since that day has my soul been pierced with bitter anguish, at the thought of having been thus instrumental in consigning to the infernal bondage of slavery, so many of my fellow-beings. I have wrestled in prayer with God for forgiveness.

Isaac Riley kept falling further into debt, and eventually sent an agent to Kentucky to sell all of his enslaved property on his brother Amos's plantation—except for Henson and his family. Henson watched as the people he had led from Maryland to Kentucky were sold. He watched them cry. He watched them beg. He watched them get hauled away. He knew that this would not have happened but for his decision to leave Ohio. This was the price of the piety that Stowe so admired.

Two years later, accompanying Amos Riley's 21-year-old son on a trip to New Orleans, Henson stopped in Vicksburg, Mississippi. He saw many of the people from Maryland whom Riley had sold. "It was the saddest visit I ever made," he later said.

> Four years in an unhealthy climate and under a hard master had done the ordinary work of twenty. Their cheeks were literally caved in with starvation and disease. They described their daily life, which was to toil half-naked in malarious marshes, under a burning, maddening sun, exposed to poison of mosquitoes and black gnats, and they said they looked forward to death as their only deliverance. Some of them fairly cried at seeing me there, and at the thought of the fate which they felt awaited me. Their worst fears of being sold down South had been more than realised. I went away sick at heart, and to this day the remembrance of that wretched group haunts me.

I MET Lauren Bokor, an archaeologist and museum educator, in her office at the top of the house where Isaac Riley once lived. The house is now part of the Josiah Henson Museum and Park, which opened in North Bethesda, Maryland, in 2021—one of several signs of renewed public attention for Henson. In recent years, his story has been told in books and in a documentary directed by Jared Brock, who wrote *The Road to Dawn: Josiah Henson and the Story That Sparked the Civil War* (2018).

Bokor showed me a map of the land that had once belonged to Riley. I looked out the window at the homes lining Old Georgetown Road and asked Bokor if their inhabitants knew that they were living on a former plantation.

"No, I really don't think so," she said. Bokor, who is white, grew up and attended high school nearby in Montgomery County in the 2000s. She read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in class but, like many of her colleagues, had never heard of Henson before she applied to work here. (Bokor has since left the museum.)

Joyce Greene, a Black woman who became a docent at the museum after she retired, told me she lives up the street. Greene considers herself a deeply engaged student of Black history, but she told me that before her first visit to the museum, she also had never heard of Henson. "I had friends of mine that didn't even believe that Maryland was a slave state," Greene told me.

In Riley's former living room, I told Mark Thorne, the site manager for the museum, that I was having trouble overcoming the emotional hurdle of Henson's choice to bring his group to Kentucky from Ohio. Thorne, who is Black, said some Black visitors have a hard time forgiving Henson, even if they know that he never forgave himself.

But Thorne believes that Henson's experience watching his friends get sold, separated, and sent to plantations farther south served as the motivation for his later work helping enslaved people escape to Canada.

"I think that is what gave him the drive. That's what made him be like, 'I've got to make this right,'" Thorne told me. "If he hadn't done that, would he have been so determined to do good?"

Henson had been unsure, before he set out on that trip to New Orleans, about its purpose, but he soon realized that he was going to be sold. He was furious, and decided to kill the young Riley in his sleep. But just as he was about to bring down the axe, the same Christian conviction that had prevented him from staying in free Ohio prevented him from striking the deadly blow. (This was another moment that Stowe describes as being deeply moving to her.) Instead, in an unexpected turn of events, Henson saved Riley's son's life.

Some days after Henson had nearly killed him, Riley's son became gravely ill with malaria. Henson nursed him back to health. "If I had sold him I should have died," the young Riley said. To thank Henson, he decided not to sell him.

When Henson returned to Kentucky and was reunited with his family, he vowed not to leave the question of whether he'd be separated from them again to the health or economic circumstances of the Rileys. He was going to escape, and he was going to bring his family with him.

On a moonless Saturday night in September 1830, Henson and his family left the Riley plantation. Sundays were rest days, and on that Monday and Tuesday, he was supposed to work on a farm many miles away; he hoped that they might gain a head start before anyone noticed his absence. For an enslaved person, running away carried enormous risk—most fugitives were caught and returned or died in the process. Running away with a child made a successful journey to freedom all the more improbable. Running away with *four* children would have seemed like a suicide mission. But Henson was determined. His wife, Charlotte, made him a knapsack that he could use to carry their two youngest children on his back.

For two weeks, the family traveled through insufferable cold, with meager rations, always by night to avoid detection. They were aided by people who were sympathetic to the cause of abolition. After more than a month of travel, Henson came upon a schooner at the edge of Lake Erie. He told a worker on the schooner who he was and what he was doing, and asked for help getting his family across the water to Canada. The ship's captain, a Scottish man, agreed to bring them to Buffalo, New York, where they could take a ferry across the border.

In Buffalo, the captain arranged and paid for the ferry. Henson was overcome with emotion and thanked the man for his kindness. Before the ferry pushed off from the shore, Henson promised the captain, "I'll use my freedom well."

Upon arriving in Canada, Henson fell to the ground, grabbed handfuls of sand, and kissed them as the grains dribbled through his fingers. The 600-plus-mile journey had taken a month and a half. Henson was 41 years old. His family was with him. He was finally free.

He soon found work on a farm and made a home for his family in a shanty that had previously been occupied by pigs. He used a shovel to get rid of the thick membrane of manure that lined the floors. Over time, as he saved money, he was able to purchase some pigs of his own, a horse, and a cow.

He took seriously the vow he had made to the captain before he crossed into Canada. "After I had tasted the blessings of freedom," Henson recounted in his autobiography, "my mind reverted to those whom I knew were groaning in captivity, and I at once proceeded to take measures to free as many as I could." After establishing himself in Canada, Henson traveled back to the American South to help others make their way to freedom.

By asking whether Henson's decisions were right or wrong, we focus more on individual actions than on the larger system of barbarity in which those decisions had to be made.

On one trip to Kentucky, in order to prevent white people from thinking that he was a fugitive, he pretended to be mentally ill:

> To this end I procured some dried leaves, put them into a cloth and bound it all round my face, reaching nearly to my eyes, and pretended to be so seriously affected in my head and teeth as not to be able to speak … To all their numerous inquiries I merely shook my head, mumbled out indistinct answers, and acted so that they could not get anything out of me; and, by this artifice, I succeeded in avoiding any unpleasant consequences.

The return trip was even more treacherous. At one point, a young boy in the caravan became violently ill. The other members of the group began to take turns carrying him on their back, but his condition worsened. The boy asked to be left in a secluded place to die alone; he didn't want to hold back the group. It was another impossible choice: care for the boy and risk the entire group being caught, or abandon him? Reluctantly, they left him behind, only for the boy's brother to soon lament the decision and run back to his sibling. A stroke of luck spared the travelers from further deliberation: They met a Quaker man whose family offered to care for the boy until he recovered, while the rest went on.

The group eventually reached the Canadian shoreline. Henson watched as they crossed the border and experienced a deep sense of pride. "They danced and wept for joy, and kissed the earth on which they first stepped, no longer the SLAVE—but the FREE."

I wondered whether Henson felt that he had paid his moral debt. Could he ever? Did the 118 people he said he saved from slavery justify the 18 who were sold after his failure to let them stay in Ohio?

At the museum in Maryland, Mark Thorne told me that he believes spending too much time considering what Henson should or shouldn't have done misses the point. By asking whether his decisions were right or wrong, we focus more on individual actions than on the larger system of barbarity in which those decisions had to be made. As one of Thorne's colleagues at the museum puts it, "He was trying to be an honorable man in a dishonorable system."

Or as Henson put it: "Before God I tried to do my best, and the error of judgment lies at the door of the degrading system under which I had been nurtured."

WHEN HENSON was about 50 years old, his son, who had begun a bit of schooling, started teaching his father how to read. The confidence that this skill gave Henson inspired him to imagine a new set of possibilities, both for himself and for those



around him. Starting around 1833, Henson worked with a group of other Black refugees to search for land they could call their own. He was chosen to select the location for the group, and soon he came across an area east of Lake St. Clair and the Detroit River—a township named Dawn. Here, a group of people who had once been tasked with sustaining the land for others might be able to sustain some for themselves.

Henson worked hard to raise money for Dawn. "I have made many journeys into New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Maine," he later reflected, "in all of which States I have found or made many friends to the cause." On a trip to Boston in the 1840s, he met and befriended a politician named Samuel Atkins Eliot. Eliot was moved by Henson's life story, which he soon decided to write down and read back to Henson for his approval. *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada, as Narrated by Himself* was published in 1849.

The slave narrative was by then an established genre in American literature. These books played an essential role in bringing the experiences and interior lives of formerly enslaved people—almost all of whom had escaped to freedom—to the attention of a wide audience. Because most enslaved people were legally or socially prevented from learning how to read and write, some authors dictated their stories to white abolitionists. Others, like Frederick Douglass, wrote their own stories. The first edition of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave: Written by Himself* was published in 1845 and became the most famous of the American slave narratives.

In her book, *Sharp Flashes of Lightning Come From Black Clouds: The Life of Josiah Henson*, Jamie Ferguson Kuhns, a historian who has worked closely with the Josiah Henson Museum in Maryland, writes that Henson's autobiography sold decently in its first few years. But after the 1853 publication of Stowe's *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Henson's name became widely known, and sales of his own book exploded. It became one of the three most popular slave narratives in the world, alongside Douglass's and Olaudah Equiano's, which was first published in England in 1789.

Scholars have debated when, exactly, Stowe first encountered Henson's story, when she met Henson, and whether she may have distorted these facts to support the veracity of her book. (Scholars have also noted other figures and slave narratives she likely drew upon for inspiration when creating the character of Uncle Tom. In his book *Mightier Than the Sword: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Battle for America*, David S. Reynolds cites "Stowe's insistence that no individual source yielded any character." Reynolds names several other possible sources for Tom, including a freedman named Thomas Magruder, who lived in a cabin in Indianapolis known as Uncle Tom's Cabin.) According to Henson,

Stowe invited him to meet her at her home in Andover, Massachusetts, in 1849. Stowe, he said, was "deeply interested in the story of my life and misfortunes, and had me narrate its details to her." But the scholar Marion Starling, in her 1981 book, *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History*, suggests that Stowe's explicit linking of Henson to Uncle Tom was "an afterthought and a publicity stunt." In this version of events, Stowe did not meet Henson until 1853, a year after *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published. Only by 1858, Starling argues, did Stowe begin emphasizing the importance of Henson's story as a way of providing further legitimacy to her own. That year, Stowe wrote a preface to a new edition of Henson's autobiography.

Stowe's novel was so popular that it spawned a cottage industry: There were Uncle Tom toys, games, handkerchiefs, even coffee mugs. As Jim O'Loughlin has written, "It was perhaps the most influential cultural text in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America not despite its varied incarnations, but because of them." But it also sparked a backlash. Before the Civil War, at least 29 "anti-Tom" novels were published, according to Reynolds, many portraying life for enslaved people in the South as better than it was for free Black people in the North.

Anti-Tom minstrel shows also became popular; these performances riffed on the novel's characters and plot in order to defend slavery. (Stowe could do nothing to stop these performances; federal copyright law did not give authors the right to control adaptations of their work until 1870.) In Stowe's novel, Tom is a strong, Christian martyr. By contrast, some of the anti-Tom novels and plays present him as weak and docile, in need of, and grateful for, the protection of a white master. Many more people saw Uncle Tom plays than ever read the book. The proliferation of anti-Tom works meant that, over time, the idea of "Uncle Tom" shifted in the public consciousness.

Henson himself was, understandably, ambivalent about the association. "I have been called 'Uncle Tom,' and I feel proud of that title," he reflected in his autobiography. "If my humble words in any way inspired that gifted lady to write such a plaintive story that the whole community has been touched with pity for the sufferings of the poor slave, I have not lived in vain." In 1876, Henson went on a speaking tour of Great Britain. To draw in audiences, his talks—arranged by John Lobb, a white Englishman who edited the edition of his book published that year—were marketed as an opportunity to see the "original" Uncle Tom. According to Lobb, Henson, then in his late 80s, spoke to more than half a million people during his time in Britain. He even met Queen Victoria, at Windsor Castle in early 1877.

But Henson, it seems, may have also grown weary of being tied to the character of Uncle Tom, and perhaps of being overshadowed by him. In a speech in Glasgow, Scotland, Henson made a point of proclaiming that he was his own man—not the character from Stowe's books or any of that character's countless popular depictions and distortions. "Now allow me to say that my name is not Tom, and never was Tom," he said, "and that I do not want to have any other name inserted in the newspapers for me than my own. My name is Josiah Henson, always was, and always will be."

In the early 20th century, "Uncle Tom" became an epithet used to describe Black people who supported white efforts at segregation. During the civil-rights movement, it was employed as a term of derision among activists—Malcolm X used it frequently in his speeches. As Kuhns notes, he directed it with particular venom toward Martin Luther King Jr. "Just as Uncle Tom, back during slavery, used to keep the Negroes from resisting the bloodhound, or resisting the Ku Klux Klan, by teaching them to love their enemy, or pray for those who use them spitefully, today Martin Luther King is just a 20th-century or modern Uncle Tom," Malcolm said—not a hero, but a traitor.

DRESDEN, ONTARIO, in early spring was layered with intermittent patches of snow that had fallen in the days before, and the sky was covered in a blanket of silver clouds signaling that another snowstorm was imminent. I had come to visit the site of Henson's Dawn settlement, a community that covered 200 acres and became a refuge for hundreds of free Black people. Henson's home still stands here, as does a museum dedicated to his life. Until recently, it was known as Uncle Tom's Historic Site.

Local members of the Black community had tried to change the museum's name since the 1990s, but their efforts always fell short. "There were members of the community that were concerned that

In a glass case holding tools of torture from Amos Riley's Kentucky plantation, I saw a pair of handcuffs so small that they could only have been used on children.

we're going to lose that name recognition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. So the decision was made to keep it as it was," Steven Cook, the curator of the museum, told me. Cook is a fifth-generation descendant of refugees who escaped to Canada from Kentucky.

Finally, in 2022, the museum decided to rename the site the Josiah Henson Museum of African-Canadian History. Some community members complained that the change amounted to rewriting history. "It soon became apparent to us that they believed that Uncle Tom was an actual person that lived on this road," Cook said, shaking his head. "So we had that battle against us, to educate the public as to why the fictitious character had taken over Josiah Henson's real story."

Cook brought me into a room called the Underground Railroad Freedom Gallery. To our right were two glass cases holding some of the tools of torture and control used on Amos Riley's plantation in Kentucky.

There was a bullwhip with tight, tan coils, its leather tip tied in a knot at the end to intensify the violence of the lash when it struck the backs of the enslaved. There was a speculum oris, whose long black prongs were used to hold open the mouths of enslaved people who refused to eat. There was a thumbscrew, used to crush the fingers of someone who, for example, failed to provide information about the whereabouts of a runaway. There was a billy club, shackles connected to a ball and chain, and a pair of handcuffs so small that they could only have been used on children.

In an adjacent case was an item that I had read about but had never seen in person—an iron collar that would be placed around the neck of an enslaved person to either prevent them from running away or punish them for having already done so. It looked so heavy, so menacing, gleaming under the museum lights.

I was beginning to feel overwhelmed by the presence of these tools, imagining how they had been used to punish and torture. But Cook has a different way of thinking about them. "When I'm in this section," he said, "I always talk about *This is why our people resisted.*" Enslavers "had to create these devices and keep adapting them, because we kept escaping. We kept trying and resisting."

I looked at the iron collar and imagined it wrapped around the neck of an enslaved woman. Maybe she had been trying to escape with her child and was caught in the woods by dogs and men on horses. I thought of how unwieldy the collar would be, how she wouldn't have been able to bend down and hug her child. I thought about Josiah Henson, and how a collar like this might have been worn by some of the people around him on the Riley plantation. As an overseer, Henson himself had been responsible for ensuring that the other enslaved workers did all that they were supposed to do.

"I often wonder, in that position, did he have to dole out punishment?" Cook said. Had Henson ever placed someone's finger in a thumbscrew? Had he ever whipped someone? Had he ever shackled someone to a ball and chain? Had he ever been the one to turn the key that locked an iron collar around a neck? Henson never mentioned an instance like this in his autobiography, but that doesn't mean it didn't happen. Some historians have estimated that as many as two-thirds of overseers were Black. Even Uncle Tom, at the end of Stowe's novel, is beaten to death by two Black slave drivers.

The job of every overseer, Black or white, was the same: Control. Production. Punishment. Perhaps this is a reason Henson is excluded from the pantheon of well-known fugitives from slavery; it is difficult to tell a wholly inspiring story about someone who might have, even reluctantly, inflicted the torture themselves.

Cook and I made our way outside, where the temperature had begun to drop as the sun started its slow descent behind the trees. I examined the remnants of the community that Henson had built, and thought about what a loss it is that he has not been part of our collective understanding of the history of slavery. Not every enslaved person was Frederick Douglass. Not every enslaved person was Harriet Tubman. And even those two individuals, as celebrated as they are, were not the morally unadulterated characters that we sometimes make them out to be. Which is to say, they were human. So was Josiah Henson. There is value in reading a slave narrative in which the central protagonist makes morally dubious decisions, regrets them, struggles with them. For the 250 years that the institution existed, generations of people were forced to make a series of impossible decisions within it.

There is value in reading a slave narrative in which the central protagonist makes morally dubious decisions, regrets them, struggles with them.

We walked to the far end of the site, where a wooden cabin stood: Josiah Henson's home. It was here that, on August 1, 1854, he sat with Douglass, who had come to visit the settlement for Canada's Emancipation Day, commemorating the end of slavery in the country 20 years prior.

I looked around and imagined the moment. These two men had, each in his own way, become giants of the antislavery movement. Henson, then in his 60s, was almost 30 years older than Douglass. By this time he had seven children and at least 10 grandchildren. I wondered if they spoke about how unlikely such a meeting would have felt to them all those decades ago, when they were both boys born into bondage in Maryland. I wondered if they traded stories of meeting the sorts of people—presidents, queens, archbishops—who once seemed to exist in a different world. I wondered if they spoke about their books, having both written memoirs that shaped the consciousness of a nation. I wondered if they commiserated over those they had lost. I wondered if they laughed together, remembering something their children or grandchildren had done that had filled their bellies with delight. I wondered if they felt a sense of peace. I hoped so. *A*

Clint Smith is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

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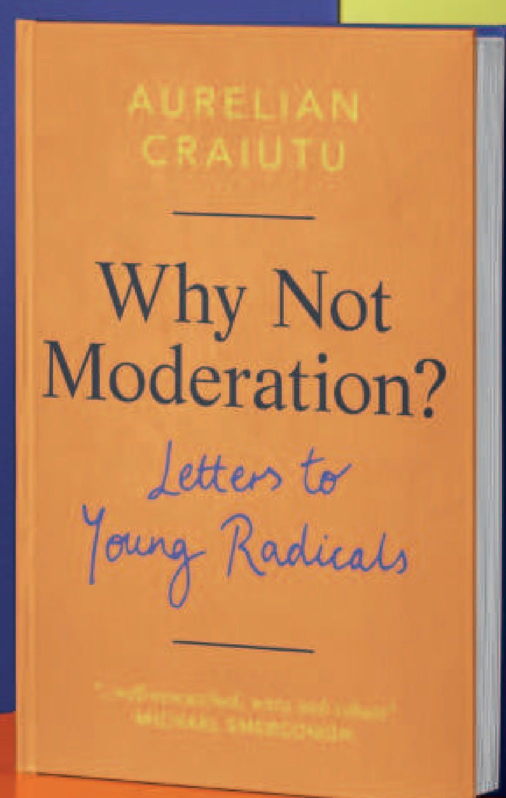
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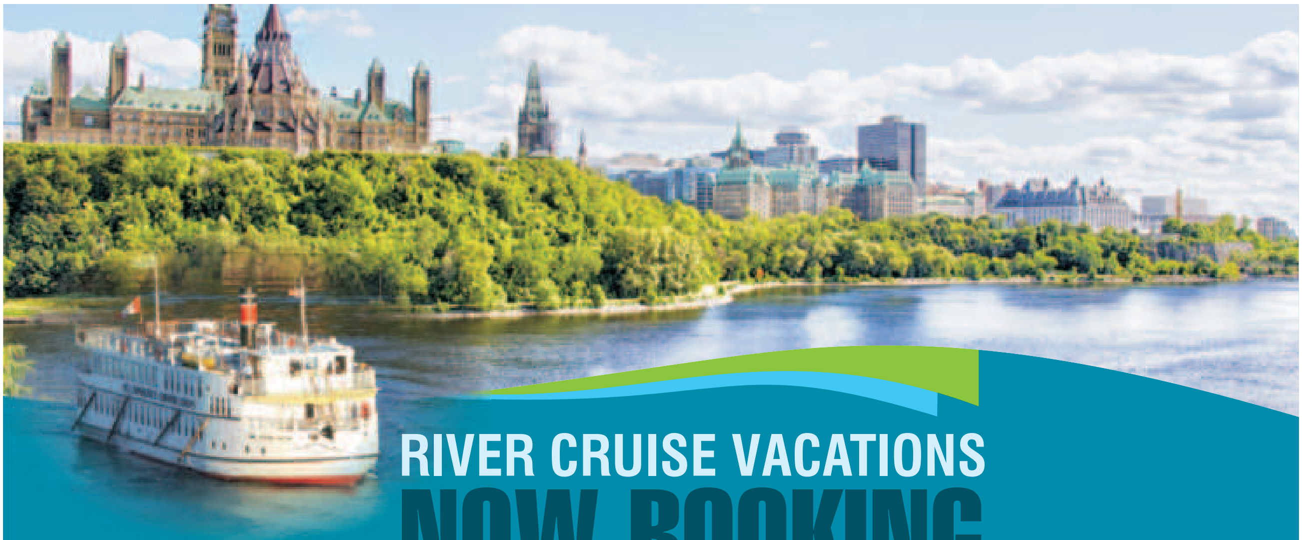
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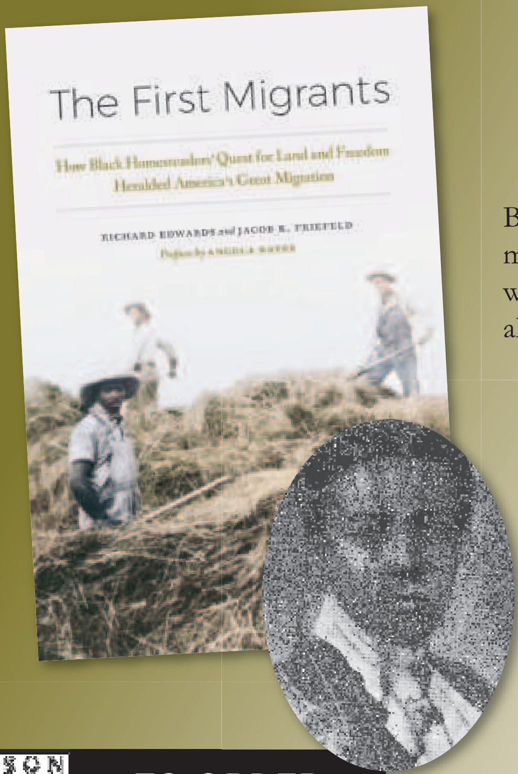
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By Caleb Madison

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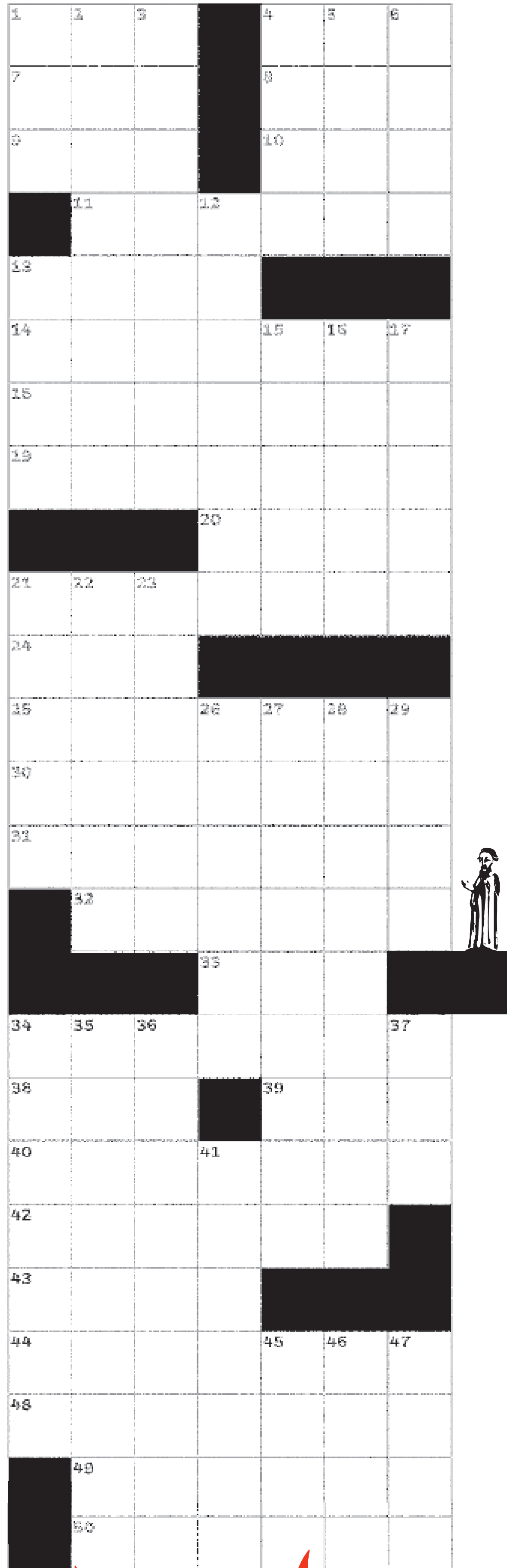
1 Govt. agency that issues driver's licenses
4 Cry really hard
7 French "yes"
8 Govt. agency that monitors pollution
9 Superlative suffix
10 "It's Raining ____" (1982 hit by the Weather Girls)
11 Enclosing behind bars
13 Enlightenment philosopher David who wrote *A Treatise of Human Nature*
14 Aristocratic snobbery
18 Addresses with a long and emotional tirade
19 Out of everyday usage for a long, long time
20 Per
21 Hofstadter portrayer on television
24 Oscar-winning Forest role
25 Sprint competition?
30 In 2015, it broke the Guinness World Record for largest gathering for a single video game
31 First of two metaphorical weighers of potential options
32 Supports with arms?
33 Infinite power
34 Address of many churches?
38 2003 Newbery Medal winner for *Crispin: The Cross of Lead*
39 Sch. with a Prayer Tower
40 Microsoft base
42 Takes a long, hard look at oneself?
43 Desire
44 Values over
48 Account with a negative balance?
49 Hinds of *Silence*
50 Deposit source

DOWN

1 A deer, a female deer
2 Having brawny biceps and pectorals, say
3 Supplement found in orange juice and used to fight colds
4 Prefix before *sweet* for some chocolate chips
5 The opposite of closed
6 Sound from a gun
12 With 26-Down and 41-Down, Irving Berlin standard whose name was adapted from a Bible quote
13 Mythological wife of Zeus
15 Biblical son almost sacrificed by Abraham
16 Fetch projectile
17 Sweet Japanese rice-cake dessert
21 Controversial U.S. military prison established by Dubya in 2002
22 Forum bigwigs, briefly
23 Big brand for training children?
26 See 12-Down
27 "This is too much for me"
28 Steers like Bevo
29 Wraps
34 People who turn fantasy into reality?
35 Cry over a late lunch, say?
36 Close no matter what
37 Nonfunctioning
41 See 12-Down
45 Hill of ____ (ancient burial site)
46 Fire
47 No longer drafty?

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